

THE BATTLE OF  
**KURSK**

ALL HELL BROKE LOOSE: 800,000

NAZI TROOPS LINED UP TO FIGHT

# Bringing History to Life

## Moment of destiny

Hitler and Stalin met in  
decisive armoured duel

## Eastern Front death match

Clash at Prokhorovka  
settled the fight

## German plans revealed

British codebreakers  
warned of attack

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New tanks and planes  
played decisive role



## HITLER'S CHOICE

Bruised by Stalingrad, Führer  
hesitated over new attack



## FOUR ACES

Stalin's leading generals  
called the shots

★ RED ARMY WENT ON THE OFFENSIVE: BEATEN NAZI SOLDIERS FLED WEST ★

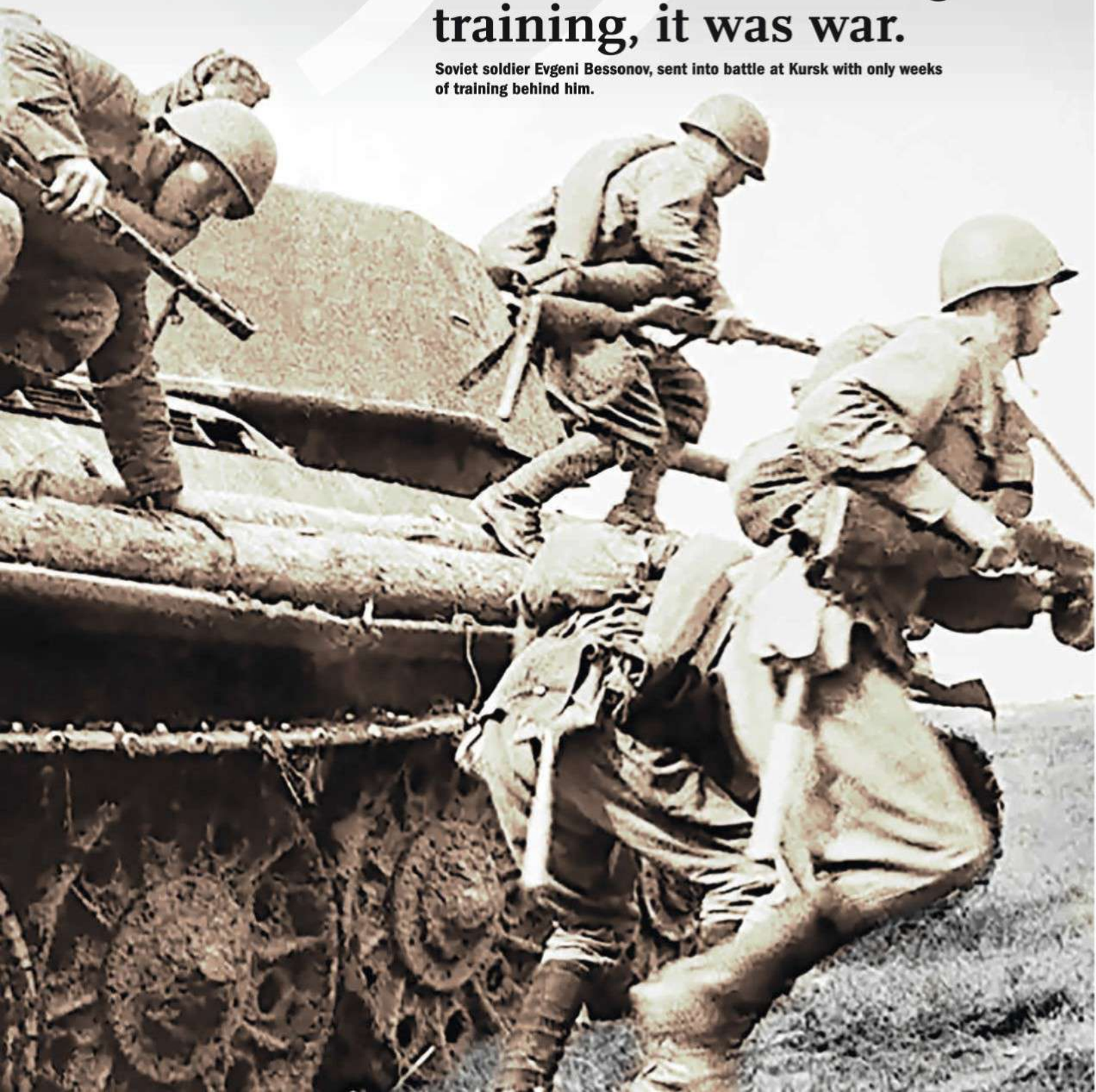
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“That was my baptism of fire. This was no longer training, it was war.”

Soviet soldier Evgeni Bessonov, sent into battle at Kursk with only weeks of training behind him.





# WELCOME

By 1943, Adolf Hitler had realised that the German Army was no longer capable of fighting an offensive war. The army was short of men, guns and tanks, and the Luftwaffe could not afford to lose any more aircraft. Consequently, when Hitler flew to his forward headquarters in Ukraine in February 1943, he brought with him a clear message: the German Army would no longer go on the offensive. For the next year, it would instead defend its positions and let the Red Army exhaust itself in futile attacks.

As we know, that's not how history turned out. At the meeting in Ukraine, Hitler's generals identified a vulnerable spot on the front line where hundreds of thousands of enemies could be captured and the Soviets weakened before they launched their summer offensive. After weeks of deliberation, the Führer was persuaded to make a fateful decision: all forces were to be deployed to the front line salient where they would trap the Red Army near the city of Kursk, 500 kilometres south-west of Moscow.

For the next few months, both the German Army and the Red Army staked everything on winning the coming Battle of Kursk. Soviets in their thousands built impenetrable defensive lines, while German units transported newly developed Tiger tanks and Wespe (Wasp) guns by the hundreds to the front line. Finally, on 5th July 1943, Soviet artillery shattered the silence of the balmy Russian summer night. The Battle of Kursk was underway, and the winner of World War II would be decided during the following week's engagements.

**Enjoy the issue!**



*For the Red Army, a human life counted for very little. The army's senior commanders were happy to sacrifice thousands of men for victory – even at Kursk.*



# EASTERN FRONT - Spring 1943



FINLAND

Helsinki

Leningrad

SOVIET UNION

Reichskommissariat  
Ostland

Moscow

Minsk

GERMANY

Reichskommissariat  
Ukraine

Orel

Kursk

Don

Kharkiv

Rostov

Odessa

Sevastopol

Maykop

Black Sea

Germany, German-occupied  
territories and German Allies

Soviet Union

→ Planned offensive



# CONTENTS

## Moment of destiny on the Eastern Front

Hitler is unnerved after being defeated at Stalingrad and prepares to go on the defensive. But then his generals point out a small pocket in the front line at Kursk. It's time for Hitler to make his fateful decision. **Page 6**

## The calm before the storm

During the spring of 1943, fighting on the Eastern Front diminishes and an ominous silence descends on the 2,000-kilometre-long front line. Behind closed doors, both the Soviets and Germans prepare for a decisive battle. **Page 20**

## Arms race to decide the war

The Germans know that the war cannot be won without new weapons. Too many men have lost their lives, so it's vital to develop tanks and aircraft that can protect crews and pilots as well as secure victories in 1943. **Page 32**

## Japan did not have the strength to help

As the tide turns, Hitler's cries for help to Japan grow more desperate. But the empire is spooked by past encounters with the Red Army and has enough to do in its own war against the US in the Pacific. **Page 46**

## All hell broke loose

Early on the morning of 5th July 1943, Soviet artillery begins a massive bombardment of German lines. The Battle of Kursk is underway. **Page 50**

## Closing the pocket

To win, two German armies must fight their way from the north and south of the Kursk pocket. The army does everything to ensure mission's success. **Page 68**

## Death match on the plain

The offensive culminates on sloping terrain near the village of Prokhorovka. Here, a thousand tanks crash together in the Battle of Kursk's decisive encounter. **Page 84**

## If you didn't get killed, you were lucky

Wolfgang Kloth fought at Kursk where only chance determined who survived. **Page 100**

## Soviets go on the offensive

After the Germans' fighting strength is depleted by the gruelling offensive, the Red Army strikes back. Soon the Nazis are on the run from the overwhelming counter-attack. **Page 104**

*A thousand-yard stare is a typical of soldiers brutalised by vicious close-quarter combat. The drawn pistol in one hand and field shovel in the other testify to the horrific melee to which this German has been party.*







# MOMENT OF DESTINY ON THE EASTERN FRONT

The first of this year's attacks, as soon as the weather permits, is Operation Citadel.

After much deliberation, Hitler decided to go on the offensive again in 1943.



# Eastern Front, winter 1943



*After the battle of Stalingrad, the Germans and Soviets had to decide their next move. Both concluded that the decisive action would happen at Kursk.*



# Moment of destiny on the Eastern Front

**In early 1943, Germany was under pressure on the Eastern Front after its defeat at Stalingrad. Hitler ordered all attacks suspended, but then a proposal from a colonel-general landed on his desk. It highlighted an area near the town of Kursk where the paper's author believed the Soviets were walking into a trap.**

By Henrik Nordskilde

**A**dolf Hitler was under pressure as he stepped into Army Group South's headquarters in the city of Zaporizhzhia in Ukraine on 18th February 1943. In addition to the defeats at Stalingrad, Kharkiv, and the city of Kursk, Nazi Germany's other problems were beginning to spill over onto the Eastern Front. The campaign in North Africa had turned from triumph to failure. The vaunted Desert Fox, Erwin Rommel, and his Afrika Korps were in full retreat, the Allies were already on their way to take Tunisia, and when – not if – Africa fell, the Americans and British would probably attempt a landing in southern Europe via the Mediterranean.

The threats were all too real, and for the leader of the Third Reich, there was only one solution: halting all offensives in the Soviet Union. As he told his generals, this would allow him to release troops quickly from the Eastern Front to Italy and the Balkans should it become necessary over the course of the year. Germany had to go on the defensive on the Eastern Front, and the army would have to rely on courage and new weapons to protect the vast agricultural areas and hundreds of factories that it had captured over the previous 20 months.

The decision was reinforced by the intensification of Allied bombing raids over Germany and the withdrawal of crucial Luftwaffe reserves from the Soviet Union to defend German cities. The armed forces no longer had the strength for another attack.

Hitler had come to tell his officers on the Eastern Front, there in Zaporizhzhia, that there would be no new summer offensive. But by the time Hitler boarded his plane home a few hours later, his plans had changed: a proposal for a small advance in the middle of the more than 2,000-kilometre-long front line had captured the Führer's attention. Around the Russian city of Kursk, which had been recaptured by the Soviets a few months earlier, was a bulge. For Hitler, it represented a golden opportunity to turn the tide of war on the Eastern Front.

## German declaration of "total war"

On the same day that Hitler was discussing strategy in Ukraine, his propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, delivered his famous "total war" speech at the Berlin Sportpalast. The Nazi regime had gathered 14,000

fanatical Nazis at the indoor arena in southern Berlin to cheer as Goebbels spewed bile and fear across the airwaves. The minister confessed that Germany was in danger of losing World War II and that the war effort needed to intensify.

In a fiery address designed to work his audience into a frenzy, Goebbels told the German people that the war now threatened to *"overshadow all previous human and historical experience"* but that not acting would lead *"to the destruction of the Reich and a total Bolshevisation of the European continent"*. *"The German army, the German people and their allies alone have the strength to save Europe from this threat ... Danger faces us. We must act quickly and decisively,"* Goebbels shouted, predictably eliciting a loud cheer from his carefully cultivated audience. Next came the famous words that would lead Germany into a new phase of the war:

*"Are you and the German people willing to work, if the Führer orders, 10, 12 and if necessary 14 hours a day and to give everything for victory? ... Do you want total war? If necessary, do you want a war more total and radical than anything that we can even imagine today?"*

The arena howled its assent. The Nazis present almost drowned out Goebbels's voice as he wound up his speech with a rallying call: *"Now, people rise up and let the storm break loose!"*

The Germans had been ordered to give everything, and Hitler had just decided where they must give it: total war was waiting at Kursk.

## Nazis feared defeat

Goebbels' announcement that Germany risked being defeated demonstrated the seriousness of the situation in 1943. The speech at the Sportpalast was the first time the Nazi leadership had officially admitted that the war could be lost and that the German army was in a tight situation on the Eastern Front. The winter had been hard on the German war machine, and the failed attempt to capture Stalingrad had cost them dearly. The attack had been launched in the summer of 1942, but by January 1943, General Friedrich Paulus' 6th Army was surrounded and was finally forced to surrender to the Red Army. By the time the fighting in Stalingrad ended on 2nd February, 180,000 German soldiers had lost their lives, and

## FACTS

Goebbels' famous Sportpalast speech, declaring total war against Germany's enemies, can be heard in full at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sportpalast\\_speech](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sportpalast_speech)



90,000 had been taken prisoner. Enormous quantities of equipment were lost, and the officer corps was also depleted: alongside Paulus, 22 other generals had surrendered to the Soviets, much to Hitler's annoyance. The defeat at Stalingrad had shaken the Germans and even Joseph Goebbels, outwardly confident as ever, wrote in his diary on 4th February that the announcement that the 6th Army had capitulated had "shocked" the German people.

After the victory at Stalingrad, the Soviets continued their advance westwards and, on 8th February, recaptured the railway hub of Kursk, some 500 kilometres south-west of Moscow. On 16th February, Ukraine's second-largest city, Kharkiv, which lies 200 kilometres to the south, also fell, despite Hitler's orders to hold out at any cost. Everywhere along the front, the Germans were in retreat. The situation prompted the army to call up all World War I veterans under the age of 50 and send them for duty on the Eastern Front. They were joined

by young teenagers from the Hitler Youth. Together, they lined up to stop the Soviet steamroller.

### **Hitler's favourite wanted to attack**

The meeting in Zaporizhzhia was unusually frank. It was 16 days after the fall of Stalingrad, and Hitler was summarising the army's problems and prospects for the rest of the year. To Hitler's surprise, Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, the leader of Army Group South, including the front in Ukraine, was ready to attack despite the difficult situation.

Von Manstein believed that Germany should launch an offensive. Specifically, he advocated an attack in an area near Kursk where the Soviets had made a sort of 'small bulge' in the front line by pushing too far forward, creating a favourable situation for the Germans.

The Red Army has secured control over an area of around 150 km by 250 km within the bulge, which protruded into German-held territory. The Soviet ►

**Field Marshal Erich von Manstein** received Hitler at Zaporizhzhia airport on 18th February. The idea of the Kursk offensive was born at the meeting held the same day.





## The generals begged Hitler in vain to get out of Zaporizhzhia, but he declined.

■ The Soviets came close to capturing the airport Hitler was flying from on 18th February 1943.

advance had extended the German front line by 550 kilometres and had captured thousands of German troops. But it also provided the German army with a chance to carry out one of its famous pincer manoeuvres that had proved so successful in the past to capture hundreds of thousands of Soviet soldiers. As von Manstein explained, Kursk was the only place where the Soviets were vulnerable.

The field marshal was therefore disappointed when Hitler took to the floor with his plans for 1943:

*"We cannot mount any major operations this year ... We have to avoid any risk. I think we should just take minor evasive actions."*

The Führer, who had won the hearts of his generals over three years with courageous, offensive warfare, now seemed timid. Since the Battle of Stalingrad, Hitler's decisions had become increasingly questionable, and the generals were slowly beginning to lose confidence in their leader.

### Soviets almost captured Hitler

The Germans' problems on the Eastern Front were underlined when, during Hitler's visit, Soviet tanks broke through the German lines and raced towards Zaporizhzhia. The Red Army quickly captured the airport east of the city and began gunning closer to the city's second airport, where Hitler's plane was waiting for him. The Nazi leader's driver, Erich Kempka, later described the situation on 18th February in Ukraine:

*"The generals begged Hitler in vain to get out of Zaporizhzhia, but he ... declined to leave. Not until the western airport came under attack from Rata fighters and he was satisfied that he had been sufficiently well informed during his four-day stay, and ordered the necessary countermeasures, did Hitler give the order to leave."*

The Soviet tanks were only 30 kilometres away when Hitler's plane took off from the airport, which

had just been attacked by enemy aircraft. Erich von Manstein had not persuaded Hitler to attack during the meeting, but he had planted a seed in the Führer's mind. The marshal wasn't the only one hoping for a German offensive at Kursk. More and more officers were persuaded that an advance at Kursk might be their only chance of an attack in the East in 1943.

One of the officers who recognised the opportunity for a decisive attack was the German 2nd Panzer Army commander, Colonel-General Rudolf Schmidt. He received a telephone call from his commander, Field Marshal Günther von Kluge, on 10th March – three weeks after Hitler's visit to Ukraine. At first, Schmidt didn't like what he heard. His 2nd Panzer Army was positioned at the town of Orel, north of the Kursk salient, where it was busy holding the line against advancing Soviet forces. Witnessing the Soviet attacks first-hand, Schmidt sensed that the Red Army, like the German one, was flagging.

Now von Kluge was on the phone, ordering him to launch a local counter-attack against the Soviets to secure the front line. It had to be done quickly, von Kluge told him, before the start of the period the Russians referred to as *rasputitsa* [the season without roads]. *Rasputitsa* was a time in spring and autumn when the unpaved roads outside the cities turned into puddles of mud, becoming largely unserviceable, especially for Germany's heavy military vehicles. In early spring, melt water from the snow destroyed the roads; in autumn, rainfall turned the baked roads into muddy mires.

Schmidt's analysis echoed Hitler's of three weeks earlier: his forces were so pressed that he could not carry out the type of attack von Kluge wanted before the thaw came. Instead, he suggested they *"refrain from offensive schemes and economise forces"*.

After all, as the general argued, both the 6th and the 9th Panzer Armies were already busy trying to stabilise the front line. But then Schmidt threw his superior a bone by telling him that he had an idea of how the Germans could attack once the roads improved and their men had time to organise. Schmidt outlined a plan to attack the pocket at Kursk. The marshal was quick to see the opportunity: the bulge meant that the Soviets were facing the Germans on three sides: north, west and south. It was a formidable target that made von Kluge exclaim:

*"I must say, your line of thought really has some merit"*.

### Pre-emptive attack to reduce danger

The German officer corps became increasingly optimistic about an attack at Kursk throughout March. An aggressive thrust could capture hundreds of thousands of Soviets, not to mention guns, tanks and vehicles. Such an encirclement could reduce the Red Army's strength and ensure that any offensive ►

**Total war – the shortest war was the slogan on the banners in the Sportpalast. The war had to be won quickly.**





# Field marshal demanded tactical freedom

Erich von Manstein was Hitler's favourite in 1943. He, therefore, managed to regain the army's tactical freedom after Hitler had previously forbidden his army to withdraw while under enemy fire without his express permission.

**W**hen the Germans captured Sevastopol in 1942, Hitler was full of praise for Erich von Manstein and appointed him field marshal. The admiration was not mutual: von Manstein was unimpressed by Hitler's abilities as a field commander. On several occasions, the field marshal tried to persuade the Führer to delegate responsibility for the Eastern Front to

the General Staff rather than overseeing every detail personally. Von Manstein wanted a return to a more flexible style of warfare, where generals were free to cede a geographical area in return for capturing another objective without first having to get Hitler's permission. At that time, any withdrawal clashed with Hitler's order that his officers fight each battle

to the last and hold the front line at all costs - a dictat that locked the Germans in place every time they fought a defensive battle. Erich von Manstein managed to gain more authority, however, and Hitler's visit to Zaporizhzhia in February 1943, when the Soviets were rapidly closing in, helped convince Hitler of the advantage of more flexible lines of command.

*Hitler issued a ban on withdrawing, hampering German officers' ability to act, leading to costly defeats.*







**The most skilled commander of the war was Georgy Zhukov. He defended Moscow and Stalingrad and slowed the Germans for a third time at Kursk.**

the Soviets mounted in the summer of 1943 would be easier to repel. In this sense, the attack was considered pre-emptive. It would also shorten the front line and allow the Germans to send some troops from the Eastern Front to Italy.

On 11th March, the day after the conversation between Rudolf Schmidt and Günther von Kluge, Hitler returned to Army Group South's HQ in Zaporizhzhia. This time Hitler was in high spirits, even happily calling everyone "Herr Field Marshal". Some believed that the politesse indicated that the Führer had regained his fighting spirit, but others saw it as a warning, a reminder that Hitler had neither forgotten nor forgiven Field Marshal Paulus's surrender at Stalingrad the previous month.

If it was intended to intimidate his senior commanders, the tactic failed. The only field marshal present, von Manstein, still openly disagreed with the Führer's plans. Since their last meeting on 18th February, von Manstein had been discussing alternative options with his generals, not least Schmidt and von Kluge. He was now even more vehement that a major offensive should be launched before the roads became unusable. But despite all von Manstein's arguments and arrows on maps, Hitler remained resistant to the idea, saying:

*"Through continuous raids we have to keep the initiative and maintain losses at a ratio of about 1:10. The Russian has to be systematically weakened, not so much with divisions as with modern weapons. And then we have to hold and defend."*

The decision had not been taken because he was suddenly enamoured with defensive operations, the Führer told the assembled officers. He would have preferred a quick victory to free up the forces he needed to fight off an Allied invasion of the Balkans or Italy, an event he was sure would follow the defeat

of German troops in North Africa. But Hitler didn't want to gamble on a major attack like the one proposed by Erich von Manstein. The wounds of Stalingrad were still too raw, and he knew Germany could not afford to lose a similar number of soldiers that summer.

### **Hitler was obsessed with numbers**

Erich von Manstein was far from satisfied. That night, he wrote about Hitler in his war diary:

*"No clarity about his own agenda. We are moving on two different levels – I on the operational one, he on the level of materiel and numbers."*

The general believed that Hitler's obsession with numbers and relative power was increasing and preventing him from seizing the initiative as he had earlier in the war.

The German army had been outnumbered in the campaign against France and the offensives against the Soviet Union in 1941 and 1942. Yet they had





**You're going to have to fly out to the front in the morning.**

■ Stalin's order to Georgy Zhukov as he prepared to defend the Kursk salient.

secured magnificent victories, and von Manstein was sure that the German Army could do it again. The field marshal also knew that Germany would never be able to match the Soviets in numbers of soldiers and tanks. Hitler was waiting in vain.

Despite Hitler's show of resistance on the day, von Manstein's words must have made an impression on him: two days later – on 13th March 1943 – he visited Army Group Central in Smolensk, north of Kursk, to learn more about the situation at the salient. Among the officers present was Rudolf Schmidt, who now had the opportunity to present the idea he had pitched to Field Marshal von Kluge over the telephone. Schmidt built on von Manstein's arguments and proposed attacking the promontory simultaneously from the north and south, with the two German armies meeting in the middle in Kursk.

If all went according to plan, as many as nine Soviet infantry armies and two tank armies would be surrounded relatively quickly, explained Schmidt, who had seen for himself the hundreds of thousands

of Soviet soldiers the Germans could capture in such an attack. Schmidt claimed that the offensive would greatly reduce the risk of Soviet attacks for the rest of 1943, thereby freeing up troops to be sent to the Mediterranean to resist the expected Allied landings.

The attack would also 'straighten out the bulge', leaving far fewer miles of front line to defend. They were the same arguments Hitler had heard at Army Group South's HQ, and Hitler was slowly becoming convinced that the plan could succeed and of the significance of such a victory.

Hitler continued to work on the plan with Schmidt, concluding that the best time for the attack was just after the roads became passable again – around the end of April. The time frame would allow the Germans the time to properly organise the attack while ensuring that the tanks rolled forwards before the Soviets had time to establish an impenetrable defence. Hitler was convinced. A pre-emptive strike at Kursk at the end of April could slow the Soviets. The generals' solution was the right one. The Red ►►



**The wide tracks of the T-34 tank made it perfect for attacks in the Soviet mud. In the summer, this advantage was nullified, and the Germans were more evenly matched against the Red Army.**





## Hitler orders the attack on Kursk

On 15th April 1943, Hitler decided that the first offensive of the spring would be Operation Citadel, a push against the Kursk salient. The offensive's aims and principles were detailed in Operational Order No. 6.

Throughout the war, Hitler issued a series of Operational Orders. Number six contained only one plan: the coming attack at Kursk. Here are excerpts of the order, which can be read in full in David M Glantz's *The Battle of Kursk*.

### ORIGINAL SCHEDULE:

The attack must be carried out quickly, as soon as the roads allow. In this way, the Germans could use Operation Citadel to seize the initiative and then plan the rest of their campaign for summer 1943. Operation Citadel is the only German order of attack on the Eastern Front.

### STRATEGY IS CLEAR:

The Germans plan a pincer manoeuvre with attacks from north and south to surround the Soviets. As a bonus, the front line would be shortened, and thousands of German POW troops freed.

### BLITZKRIEG LIVES ON:

The concentration of planes, tanks and guns recalls Blitzkrieg tactics. In the first three years of the war, Germany used this method repeatedly to punch holes in the enemy's defences.



ADOLF HITLER

Berlin 15th April 1943

I have decided that the first of this year's attacks, as soon as the weather permits, is Operation Citadel. This attack is of the utmost importance. It must be executed quickly. It must seize the initiative for us in the spring and summer. Therefore, all preparations must be conducted with great circumspection and enterprise. The best formations, the best weapons, the best commanders, and great stocks of ammunition must be committed in the main efforts. Each commander and each man must be impressed with the decisive significance of this offensive. The victory at Kursk must be a signal to all the world. I hereby order:

1. The objective of this offensive is to encircle enemy forces located in the Kursk area by means of rapid and concentrated attacks of shock armies from the Belgorod area and south of Orel and to annihilate the enemy in concentrated attacks. During the offensive a new abbreviated front, which will save strength, will be established along the line: Nezhgol-Korocha sector—Skorodnoye—Tim — east of Shchigry-Sosna sector.
2. We must insure that
  - a. The element of surprise is preserved and the enemy be kept in the dark as to when the attack will begin.
  - b. The attack forces are concentrated on a narrow axis, in order to provide local overwhelming superiority of all attack means (tanks, assault guns, artillery, rocket launchers, etc.) to insure contact between the two attacking armies and closure of the pocket.
  - c. The attack wedge is followed by forces from the depths to protect the flanks, so that the attack wedge itself will only have to be concerned with advancing.
  - d. By prompt compression of the pocket, the enemy will be given no respite and will be destroyed.
  - e. The attack is conducted so quickly that the enemy will be denied the opportunity of either breaking out of encirclement or of deploying strong reserves from other fronts.

### SOVIETS MUST BE CAPTURED:

The crucial thing is that the Soviet soldiers do not have time to escape. Only by capturing large numbers of the enemy can the Germans weaken the Red Army and prevent a counter-attack.





f. Additional forces, particularly mobile formations, are freed up by quickly constructing a new front.

3. Army Group South will jump off with strongly concentrated forces from the Belgorod-Tomarovka line, break through the Prilepy-Oboyan line, and link up with the attacking armies of Army Group Centre east of Kursk. The line Nezhgol-Korocha sector—Skorodnoye-Tim must be reached as soon as possible to protect the attack from the east without jeopardising the concentration of forces on the main effort in the direction of Prilepy-Oboyan. Forces will be committed to protect the attack in the west; they will later be used to attack into the pocket.

5. The preparation of both army groups' forces is to be conducted under the best deception measures possible and far removed from jumping-off positions. The earliest date for the attack will be 3rd May. The march to jumping-off positions will be conducted only at night under as much cover as possible.

7. To ensure secrecy only those persons who absolutely need to know will be informed of the plan. These instructions will be passed down to lower echelons as late as possible. In any case, these plans must not be betrayed by carelessness or neglect. Furthermore, enemy espionage will be combated by reinforced Abwehr agencies.

10. The Luftwaffe will likewise commit all of its available forces on the main effort. Coordination with Luftwaffe commands will begin immediately. Special attention will be afforded in order to maintain secrecy.

11. For the success of the attack it is mandatory that the enemy does not succeed in forcing the transfer of attack formations from Citadel by attacking other Army Group South and Army Group Centre sectors. Therefore, just as they are preparing for the Citadel offensive battle, until the end of the month, both army groups must systematically prepare for defensive battle in remaining threatened front sectors. Therefore, the construction of defensive positions

#### AVOID COUNTER-ATTACKS:

The success of the operation depends on a stable front line. Any Soviet attack must therefore be repelled before and during Operation Citadel.

#### KURSK NOT A TARGET:

The German armies are supposed to meet east of Kursk. The city, after which the battle is named, is not named as a strategic target.

is to be hastened, the sectors threatened by tanks must be equipped with sufficient antitank weapons, local reserves have to be prepared, enemy's main axes have to be determined early through brisk reconnaissance, etc.

12. The final objectives of the operation are:

a. The shifting of the boundary line between Army Groups South and Centre to the general line Konotop (South)—Kursk (South)—Dolgoye (Centre).

b. The transfer of the 2nd Army with three corps and nine infantry divisions, as well as the attached Heeres troops, from Army Group Centre to Army Group South.

c. The assembly of three additional infantry divisions from Army Group Centre to be made available to the OKH in the area north-west of Kursk.

d. The removal of all mobile formations from the front for use elsewhere. Movement, especially that of 2d Army formations, must be adapted to these plans. As planned, during the operation I will initiate the movement to the south-east (Panther) as quickly as possible in order to take advantage of the enemy's confusion.

Adolf Hitler

#### HITLER'S SIGNATURE:

Order No. 6, like other notable orders, was signed by Hitler personally.





Rasputitsa – the season without roads –  
is the Russian term for the periods in  
spring and autumn when meltwater and  
rainfall changes the roads into an  
impassable network of deep, heavy mud.





Army needed to be pushed back and captured by a pincer manoeuvre, with armoured and army forces attacking from north and south. It was also clear that the attack had to be launched as soon as the rasputitsa was over, when the weather made an armoured offensive possible.

Hitler had made his decision – now it was up to fate to say if it was the correct one.

### **The Soviets were exhausted**

While the Germans were planning their key strategic manoeuvre for 1943, the Soviets were doing likewise. On the other side of the front, the Red Army was preparing for the months after the rasputitsa. At the same time as Hitler was meeting Army Group Centre, Georgy Zhukov, now a marshal of the Soviet Union – the country's highest military rank – was summoned at short notice to an important meeting with Joseph Stalin in the Kremlin.

Zhukov had led the Soviet winter offensive and devised the plan for victory at Stalingrad. Now he was on the north-western front near the River Lovat, making new plans. The 500-kilometre-or-so journey to Moscow meant a lot of travelling in a Jeep on bumpy roads. With typical Russian fortitude, Zhukov arrived in Moscow late on the evening he'd been summoned and trundled into the room where Stalin's meeting was already in progress.

The room was filled with Politburo members and senior figures in the armament industry, in particular those from the factories responsible for aircraft and tank production. The men in the room were discussing how to improve efficiency. It was after three in the morning when the meeting broke up. Only then was Zhukov called. Stalin greeted the marshal before casually asking him:

*"Have you had dinner?"*

Zhukov admitted that he hadn't had time to eat on the road.

*"Well, then come over to my place and we can talk about the situation in the Kharkiv area at the same time,"* the Soviet leader and absolute commander-in-chief replied.

Kharkiv, the important Ukrainian city south of Kursk, had just fallen into German hands again, and after the recapture, German troops had continued further north. Before the attack, the enemy intercepted and decoded Soviet messages and concluded that the Red Army was nearing exhaustion and its supply lines were dysfunctional.

Stalin, for his part, feared the Nazis' next move, believing that another German summer offensive would cost him dearly. The marshal and dictator could see trouble on the horizon following their push into German territory at Kursk. The Soviets were vulnerable there and a German offensive, in particular against Kursk, could trigger more attacks. ►



Zhukov and Stalin quickly concluded that Hitler could capture Kursk and use it as a launchpad for an assault on Moscow. The front needed to be inspected.

### **Zhukov was dispatched**

As the meeting drew to a close, Stalin thought for a moment and then looked at Zhukov:

*"You're going to have to fly out to the front in the morning."*

The dictator was taking no chances; he wanted the man he trusted most at Kursk to form a plan. It was five in the morning by the time the conversation ended; just two hours later, Zhukov marched onto a plane, fell asleep and only woke when the plane touched down at the Voronezh airfield, 200 kilometres east of Kursk. From there, he was able to get a better overview of the situation. For the Soviet Union, the moment of destiny had arrived – Zhukov needed to decide how the Red Army could finally gain the upper hand against the Germans.

The marshal had arrived in the nick of time. The situation at Kursk was worse than either he or Stalin had been told. The terrain to the south of Kursk was ripe for an enemy armoured attack, the front line was long and the defensive positions weak, and at least half a million Soviet troops were in danger of being quickly surrounded.

Zhukov called Stalin that same day and issued a blunt demand:

*"Stavka's reserves must be deployed here; otherwise, the Germans will capture Belgorod and continue their offensive on the Kursk sector."*

Zhukov's prediction was fulfilled in part a few days later when the city of Belgorod fell into German hands, making the bulge at Kursk an even more prominent and obvious German target. On 8th April, Zhukov sent a telegram to Stalin, again outlining the situation as he saw it. After inspecting the entire front line from south to north, the marshal issued his verdict: the Germans no longer had the strength for a united attack across a broad front.

It was therefore likely that Hitler would attack a narrow point on the front line with enormous force. Kursk was the obvious target and offered the Nazis the possibility of an advance on Moscow, which was Stalin's greatest concern. Zhukov estimated that the attack would also shorten the front line for the Germans, freeing up enemy troops. He could also see that the city of Kursk, a hub for important roads and railways, was a key strategic target.

Stalin and Zhukov correctly guessed the Germans' plans for an attack on the Kursk salient, but they didn't understand the motive behind the attack: that it was only a pre-emptive offensive to weaken the Soviets. The two men were left with several options. They could attack first, thus destroying the Germans' preparations, or they could formulate a defensive

strategy. Zhukov preferred the latter option, writing in a telegram to Stalin:

*"I do not believe it is necessary for our forces to mount a preventive offensive in the next few days. It will be better if we wear the enemy out in defensive action, destroy his tanks, and then, taking in fresh reserves, by going over to an all-out offensive we will finish off the enemy's main grouping."*

With those words, a thought began to take shape in Stalin's mind. The Red Army could wear down the Germans while secretly preparing a massive offensive, just as they had at Stalingrad. Then, when the time was right, the Soviets could strike back and crush the Germans once and for all. The war could be decided in a single battle, and the front line at Kursk was the perfect place to spring the trap.

### **Stalin laid out his plan**

Stalin, however, was concerned about the Soviet forces' ability to withstand a German summer offensive. He summoned Zhukov to Moscow again. On the evening of 12th April the marshal met with Stalin, alongside two colleagues, to present their reading of the situation:

*"We all believed that, proceeding from political, economic, and military and strategical considerations, the Nazis would attempt, at any price, to retain their hold on the front stretching from the Gulf of Finland to the Azov Sea."*

They also concluded that if the Germans were to take action, a two-pronged attack, from north and south, at the Kursk salient would be the obvious way to shorten the front line and try to surround a large number of Soviet soldiers. Stalin took the situation extremely seriously, as Zhukov's memoirs recall:

*"The Supreme Commander listened to our views more attentively than ever before. He agreed that the main forces should be concentrated in the Kursk area, but, just as before, he was anxious about the Moscow sector."*

Although Stalin feared the Germans would target Moscow, he backed the defensive strategy at Kursk, and together the four men devised a plan to protect the front and use the salient and its terrain to bleed German resources dry. On the same day, work began on strengthening the defences.

At the same time, the Germans adjusted their attack plans, but Hitler stuck to the overall concept. The German summer offensive – *Unternehmen Zitadelle* [Operation Citadel] – was to be of limited scope but highly aggressive. On 15th April, the Führer issued Operational Order No. 6, stating:

*"The first of this year's attacks, as soon as the weather permits, is Operation Citadel."*

The moment of destiny on the Eastern Front was approaching. ■



THEREFORE ...

## ... Guderian would stop the attack

The hero of the campaign against France, Heinz Guderian, urged Hitler to abandon the offensive at Kursk or at least change his plans. Terrain and the element of surprise militated against the success of a pincer manoeuvre.

**H**itler's top panzer commander, Colonel-General Heinz Guderian, opposed the pincer manoeuvre at Kursk. He argued, unsuccessfully, that the Germans should attack from only one direction in order to have enough strength to break through the Soviet lines. Guderian's opposition was based on his belief that three conditions should always be met before an attack with armoured forces.

First, the German forces had to have the element of surprise. But at Kursk, the Soviets knew what the Germans were up to and were preparing to resist an attack.

Second, according to Guderian, armoured attacks should occur in suitable terrain, which

wasn't the case at Kursk, where the Soviets were busy establishing anti-tank trenches and other defensive measures.

Third, Guderian insisted that panzer forces had the necessary breadth and depth to make the attack. In other words, the offensive had to be led by a sufficient concentration of tanks to ensure that the enemy's defences had to break. These were the principles the army had used to secure their great victories in 1940 in France and 1941–42 in the Soviet Union. As Guderian put it, you "don't feel with the fingers but hit with the fist".

The Germans only tried to stick to the third of these principles at Kursk, with the attack

being postponed for several months while new tanks and self-propelled guns were transported to the front.

But while Guderian was a strong advocate of tanks as the main element of the attack, it was because they could be assembled quickly to carry out a concentrated attack. At Kursk it took months to gather the necessary vehicles. Unfortunately for the Germans, while Guderian's words made an impression on Hitler – he didn't heed them all. Instead of abandoning the offensive against Kursk or attacking from only one direction, he merely postponed the attack again and again in order to build up a powerful force.



Heinz Guderian studies a map of the Eastern Front. The ordinarily aggressive tank general feared the new offensive against the Soviets.





*Red Army soldiers prepare for close combat training with fixed bayonets. The Soviets know that all hell is about to break loose, and the Germans know that the Soviets are ready to resist.*





Eastern Front, spring 1943

# THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

Did the enemy know  
that we were organising  
a strong defence behind  
the front? No doubt.

Soviet Marshal Ivan Konev on the build-up of forces in the Kursk salient.



# The calm before the storm

**For three months, from April to July 1943, the Eastern Front was quiet. But there was plenty of activity on both sides behind the lines. The Germans were shipping new planes, tanks and guns to the Kursk Front while the Soviets were busy building defences and devising a strategy to fend off the Germans' hammer blow.**

By Henrik Nordskilde

**Three leaf clover** was the name given to the Soviet triumvirate of Joseph Stalin, Sergo Ordzhonikidze and Anastas Mikoyan. The latter was given responsibility for building the defences at Kursk.

**O**n 27th March 1943, Anastas Mikoyan was summoned to a meeting with Joseph Stalin. The Armenian-born Mikoyan was a small man with a steady gaze. Despite holding no military rank, he was a key figure in the Red Army. He had joined the Bolsheviks in 1915 before quickly assuming the leadership of the Caucasus' revolutionary movement. Later, he became one of Stalin's staunchest supporters. By 1923, he had a seat on the Central Committee.

When war broke out, Stalin called his old friend into his office and put him in charge of the army's supply lines. Stalin wanted men around him that he could trust. Now, in 1943, Stalin had important orders for his old comrade.

Stalin informed Mikoyan that the Germans would launch a major offensive within a few months.

Thanks to a stream of intelligence reports and aerial photographs, Stalin knew that the Germans planned to attack the Kursk salient. Mikoyan's new task would be to organise a giant mobile reserve army behind the Soviet lines – to meet the Nazis wherever they came.

In his briefing, Stalin stressed that the new army – or 'front' as the Soviets called them – had to be *"capable of being brought into combat at the most acute and decisive moment of the battle, and for further transition to the counter-offensive."*

Mikoyan's task, the dictator continued, was to assemble, equip and secure supplies for the largest-ever Soviet reserve army. Steppe Front, as the force became known, was given extensive freedom to manoeuvre. The only requirement was that it could resist German attempts to penetrate deep behind Soviet lines. The units also had to be kept fresh to



Anastas Mikoyan

Joseph Stalin

Sergo Ordzhonikidze



deliver a decisive counter-attack once the German troops had exhausted themselves with their assault.

Stalin had already decided that Steppe Front should contain seven armies and eight armoured units. Eventually, airborne and cavalry forces were also added to its strength. Once assembled, Steppe Front had to be prepared for combat and assigned the necessary equipment and personnel. For Stalin, Mikoyan was the obvious man for the job, as he explained when the pair met:

*"You ... must take on the organising of this Reserve Front yourself, because all the material resources are concentrated in your hands. The General Staff will engage as usual in choosing the commanders, but everything else is up to you."*

### Peasants built a 100-km railway

The Soviets knew where the Nazis would attack and could therefore concentrate on defending a relatively narrow section of the front. Mikoyan set about organising the new army immediately. On 30th March, three days after talking with Stalin, he met with senior officers from across the armed forces, including those in charge of logistics, artillery, armour and communications. He ordered them to produce reports and timetables detailing when and where their men would arrive. His goal was to have the new front kitted out and ready for battle on 15th April 1943, which was less than three weeks away.

One of the challenges he faced was that much of the area designated as an assembly point for the new troops had recently been under German control. As the Nazis withdrew, they looted the nearby farms and destroyed the region's roads and railways. In March, the local newspaper *Kurskaia Pravda* carried eyewitness accounts from the residents of Khozle. In the report, the inhabitants had described how, in the last hours before falling back, the Nazis had led 52 Soviet men – mostly teenagers and the elderly – out of the village, telling them they had to clear the roads for the Germans. Instead, the soldiers shot them.

The few survivors of the massacre claimed that the departing troops had also killed elderly women in their homes, "desecrated" their daughters and left children orphaned. One woman wrote that the Nazis had stolen animals from farms and destroyed the local infrastructure before setting the village on fire. The only reason the blaze hadn't engulfed the whole settlement was that the Red Army had arrived in time to douse the flames.

News of the atrocity sparked a desire for revenge and reignited the Soviet's fighting spirit – even civilians were called upon to help ahead of the impending battle.

*"The obligation of every citizen is to appear promptly when summoned to a collection point, to receive a [work] assignment," Kurskaia Pravda*



**Moscow was turned into a fortress in 1941. Now Kursk's citizens must emulate the Muscovites by digging thousands of trenches in their city.**

informed its readers in a commentary piece that followed the eyewitness report.

A total of 300,000 civilians were sent to prepare the Soviet defences in the Kursk foothills. Within days, a thousand ordinary citizens were working to repair the town's railway station. A further 50,000 civilians from collective farms began fixing the railway line between Kursk and Kastornoye, 150 km to the east. It was a dangerous assignment as the rails were under continuous attack from the air. A new 100-kilometre-long line was also established thanks to 25,000 Soviet peasants. Their task, which included the construction of ten bridges, was completed in 32 days. The restored and extended rail network was designed to ensure that the Red Army could get supplies to the Kursk salient quickly and dispatch reinforcements as needed when the Germans attacked.

Mikoyan was so successful in restoring the region's railways that the Red Army was able to send 100,000 train cars of reinforcements and supplies to Kursk per month, some of which were destined for Mikoyan's new army behind the front line. Slowly but surely, the Soviets' defences were becoming more impenetrable. Meanwhile, the Germans continued their own preparations, unaware of the devastating strike force that was waiting for them behind the Soviets' lines.

### Defensive lines would slow the Nazis

It would take more than men, guns and tanks to slow down the Germans. Mikoyan also planned to establish a so-called deep defence, where the Germans would bleed to death as they tried to fight their way through kilometre after kilometre of tank barrages, trenches, anti-tank guns and minefields. If the attackers broke through one layer of the defences, they would run straight into another – again and again. Working with the army's generals, Mikoyan divided the Kursk salient into eight defensive lines, ►



several kilometres apart. The 'elastic defence' was so deep that the distance from the rearmost line to the front was up to 190 kilometres. The idea was that if the forces on one line could not hold out, they would withdraw to the next line of defences, from where they could fight on while fresh and well-supplied reinforcements from the Steppe Front arrived. The tactic was designed to minimise Soviet casualties while providing maximum resistance.

While young, educated Muscovite soldiers were trained to operate the often complex machinery of the Steppe Front, most of the infantry came from peasant stock and was set to digging the huge earthworks.

### **Civilians joined the effort**

Mikoyan also ordered thousands of civilians to dig trenches to slow the German armoured forces. Some of the anti-tank trenches were 3.5-metre-deep channels that no tank could hope to escape. Between April and June, the troops and civilians dug 500 kilometres of anti-tank obstacles and 4,240 kilometres of ordinary trenches. They also laid 400,000 anti-tank and anti-personnel mines and erected over 200 kilometres of barbed wire – some of it electrified. Bridges in the area were also mined to prevent Germans capturing them. In short, the Kursk salient was turned into an impregnable stronghold manned by close to two million well-armed Soviet soldiers.

Beyond the defensive lines, the Soviets established a 25-kilometre-wide militarised zone behind the front

line. Any civilians living in the area were evacuated. Deporting the local populace gave the defenders an advantage as it allowed the army to set up defensive positions in built-up areas and block any German advance by blowing up buildings.

Workers and soldiers also worked together to establish minefields, barbed-wire fences and anti-tank barricades, not just along the front line but also between and along the eight lines of defence. Nothing was left to chance. The Soviets even prepared for the Germans' new tanks: the Tiger and Panther models.

By January 1943, the Soviets had captured an undamaged Tiger and were able to examine it in detail. The engineers soon discovered that while the Tiger was heavily armoured, it also had weak points. Soviet tank crews were told to target the vision slits or the cupola where the commander sat. If the Soviets succeeded in hitting the dome, it was generally shorn off, killing the commander instantly. The Soviets even gave their tank commanders and anti-tank crews training with the result that they could hit these relatively small targets more often than not. A report from a German panzer unit in the spring of 1943 showed that the training was effective:

*"What was striking was how frequently the commander's cupola was penetrated by direct hits or badly damaged."*

Indeed, the frequency of these direct hits caused the Germans to mount

**The Steppe Front** was the name of the 1.5 million fresh soldiers sent to Kursk as a mobile reserve. They reinforced the front line wherever it was attacked.





reinforced domes on the Tiger tanks during the summer of 1943. The Soviets also had a grudging respect for the Elephant, the Germans' new self-propelled gun, but it also puzzled the Red Army leadership for a long time. It wasn't until April 1943 that Soviet spies finally secured reliable intelligence about the vehicle with its powerful 88-mm gun. Developed initially as an anti-aircraft weapon, it had also proved effective against tanks. Once the Soviet high command knew what it was up against, it trained its troops to combat the Germans' heavy tanks and self-propelled guns.

The Soviet soldiers also used a low-tech weapon: the Molotov cocktail, a bottle filled with flammable liquid. One bottle could disable a tank if the weapon was thrown accurately enough. The trick was hitting the spot above the engine on the tank's rear end.

The Soviets also focused on communication during the battle. The various weapons and aircraft had to be directed at lightning speed to be effective.

But while the Steppe Front counter-attack would be the killing blow, it wouldn't be unleashed until the Germans had used up all their strength.

### Germans bombed dummies

In less than a month, Stalin's trusted friend Mikoyan had built an army with over half a million men. ►

## The British revealed Hitler's plans

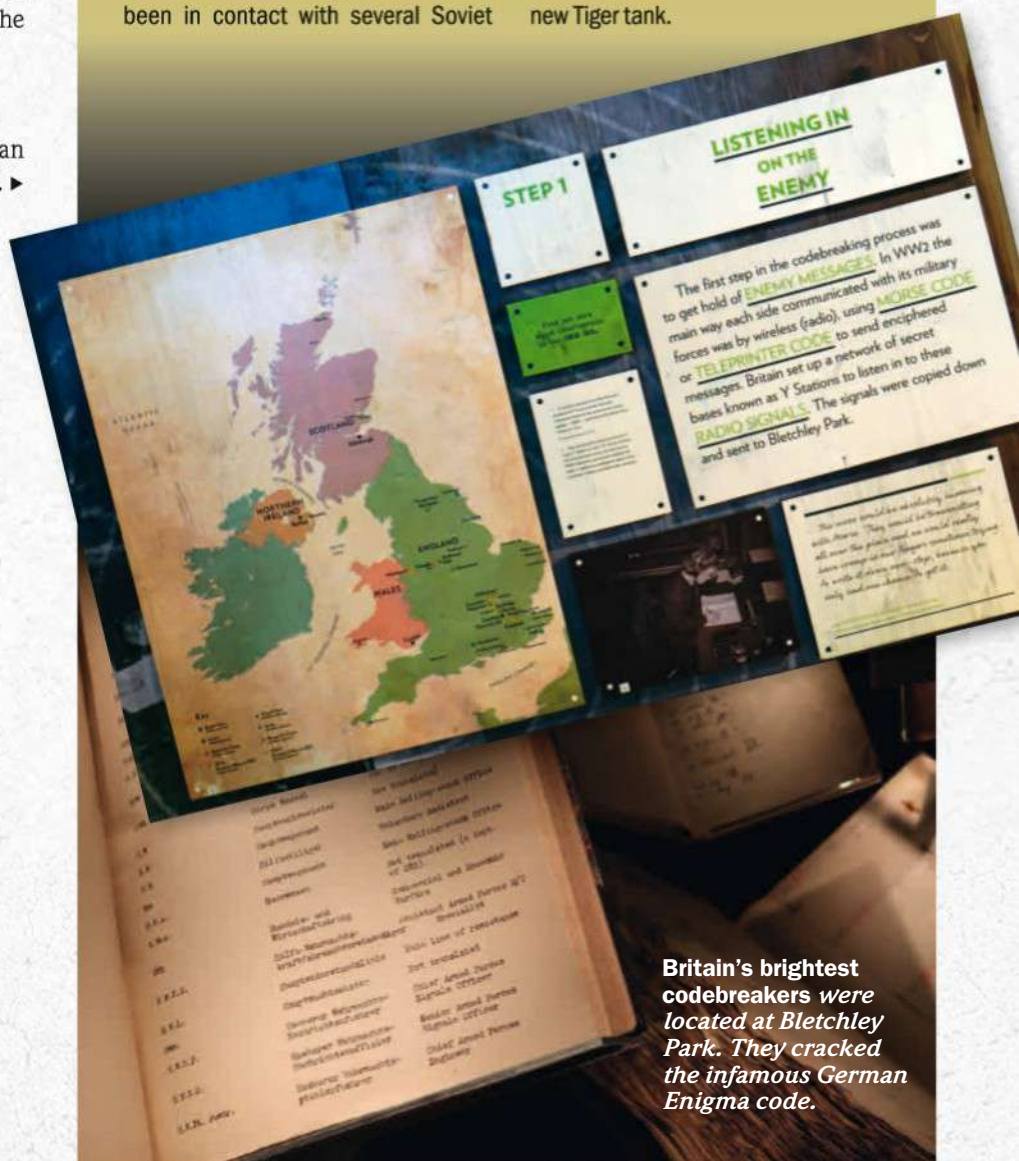
A secret agent supplied British intelligence with information about the Germans' plans. The news was immediately passed on to the Soviets.

**B**letchley Park, 70 kilometres north of London, was at the centre of Britain's wartime efforts to break German encryption codes. One of the codebreakers was John Cairncross, who had a degree in German and French, having studied at the Sorbonne and Cambridge before being employed as a translator at Bletchley Park.

During his student days, Cairncross had moved in left-wing circles and had been in contact with several Soviet

intelligence agents. When the British learned through their surveillance of German communications and precious information fed to them by a Swiss agent that there was to be an attack at Kursk, Cairncross immediately informed his Soviet contacts.

Among other leaked information, Cairncross provided precise information on possible dates for the offensive and technical data about the new Tiger tank.



Britain's brightest codebreakers were located at Bletchley Park. They cracked the infamous German Enigma code.



**The German army was bruised after two years of fighting on the Eastern Front. The 1943 offensive was postponed for several months as a result.**

More impressive still, he had managed to keep the reserve army's build up hidden from the Germans. The Soviets achieved this through their centuries-old military tradition of *maskirovka*, which translated means "disguise".

By the early 1900s, military teaching had made disguise an integral part of Soviet defensive tactics, and the Red Army used elements of it in both the defence of Moscow in the winter of 1941 and the Battle of Stalingrad in 1942–43. At Kursk, the aim was to fool the Germans into thinking that the Soviets were only preparing a defensive operation. The fact that the Steppe Front was also ready to counter-attack had to be concealed at all costs. To draw attention away from the Steppe Front's assembly point, the Soviets built in other areas. But what seemed from the air to be trenches, depots and large groups of tanks and artillery were just dummies. The Soviets even built 40 fake air bases with runways, control towers and dummy aircraft. The Red Army knew their deception was working because German pilots repeatedly bombed the bases. While the Luftwaffe busied itself with bombing the fake equipment during the day, the Soviets used the cover of night to set up their real positions, concealing them as far as possible from enemy surveillance aircraft.

The Soviet air force also joined the new front in secret. The pilots flew towards the Kursk salient at dusk at an altitude of 300 feet, where German radar could not detect them. Troops transported by train

were dropped off along the tracks rather than at stations to reduce the risk of them being spotted by German aircraft. Soviet General Ivan Konev later wrote that the Germans were no doubt aware of the Soviet's defensive preparations but not of the plan for a counter-offensive:

*"Did the enemy know that we were organising a strong defence behind the front? No doubt. And that played a positive role. The enemy thought that we were preparing only for a defensive battle. Possessing a large number of new tanks and self-propelled guns, the Germans hoped that it was not possible to stop them."*

*"Thus, as the enemy prepared, we prepared. The main thing was not to conceal the fact of our preparation, but rather the force and means, the concept of battle, the time of our counter-offensive and the nature of our defences. It is very likely that it was the only ... occasion in military history when the stronger side, having the capability of offensive action, went over to defence."*

Units at the front were also ordered to maintain radio silence and forbidden to light fires. That the tactic worked was later proven when it emerged that the Germans had estimated a much lower number of enemy troops within the Kursk salient. The Red Army also received help from behind German lines. The number of Soviet civilians joining the partisan movement and carrying out actions in German-occupied territories exploded in the spring months. ►





# Kursk was Soviets' weak point

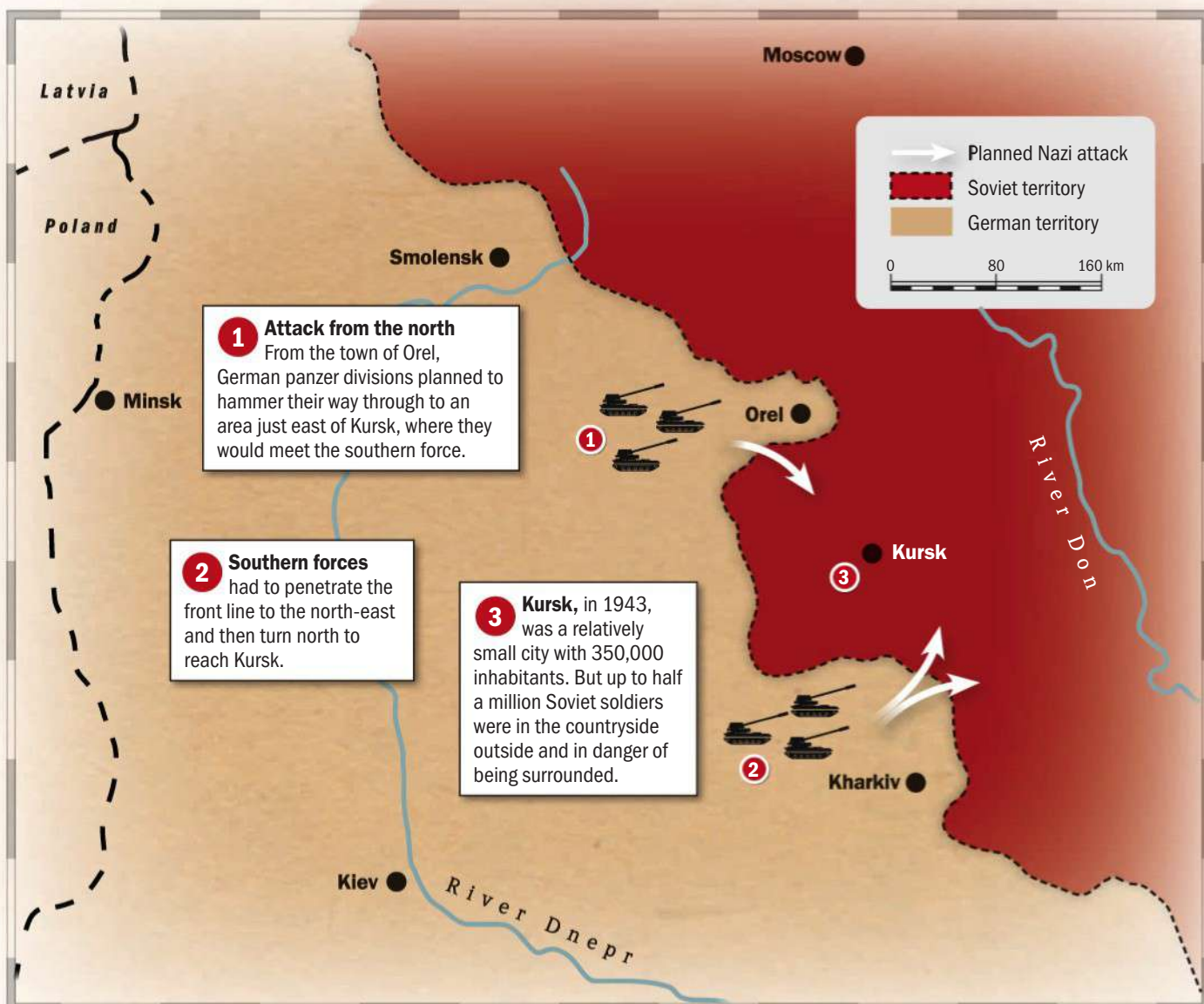


In the spring of 1943, Germany had finally managed to slow the Soviet winter advance. The front was now at a standstill, and only one location along the 2,000-kilometre line offered a clear opportunity for a pincer attack, a manoeuvre that the German panzer divisions had used so successfully in previous years. At the town of Kursk, the Soviets had pushed ahead of their main lines, causing a 'bulge'. A simultaneous attack from north and south could take several hundred thousand

Soviet troops positioned inside the bulge by surprise and give the Germans control of roads and railways in the area. Left undisturbed, the Red Army would, in all likelihood, use the troops located there to attack the German forces in the strategically important cities of Orel and Kharkiv. In addition to the practical objectives, Hitler believed that a victory would have tremendous political value and would be a crucial step towards capturing Moscow.



The Germans burned farms as they withdrew to deny the Red Army supplies.





One estimate suggests that the number of partisans rose from 100,000 in March 1943 to 142,000 in July when Operation Citadel was finally launched. The Soviet army supplied the partisans with weapons and supplies from the air, and the resistance was gradually so strong that it functioned as a regular army behind the German lines. In the end, the partisan forces often effectively controlled areas that were German-occupied territories on paper. The rebels even had airfields at their disposal where Soviet planes could land with supplies and new orders for the partisans.

In the spring of 1943, the rebels carried out 1,092 sabotage actions against the Germans, who could do

little to stop strategically important bridges, railway lines and trains from being destroyed. A German corporal wrote a letter to his wife about the hardships the partisans brought:

*"With us trains move for one day and three days have to be spent repairing the track since the partisans blow everything up. The night before last they arranged a collision between an express train and a leave train, so the trains aren't running ... That's how we live in Russia."*

By mid-May, the Soviets believed that the German attack was imminent, but Hitler's continued postponement meant that the Soviets became

## Soviet soldiers were terrified of tanks

Soviet troops had learned to fear the German panzer divisions during the war. As a result, the Red Army decided to give them 'tank training', where the men had to control their fear even when tanks rolled over their foxholes.

Experience had shown the effect tanks could have on Soviet infantry. For some soldiers, the sight of a tank coming straight at them at close range was so overwhelming that they panicked and abandoned their posts, letting the German infantry capture the positions without a fight while the tanks mowed down the fleeing soldiers. To counter the problem, the Red Army devised new

training methods before the Battle of Kursk to strengthen the men's courage in the face of enemy armour. In the spring of 1943, soldiers were sent on exercises which involved tanks driving over them as they sheltered in a trench. An anti-tank gunner named Nikolai Litvin later recalled the training:

"The tanks continued to advance closer and closer. Some comrades became

frightened, leaped out of the trenches, and began to run away. The commander saw who was running and quickly forced them back into the trenches, making it clear they had to stay put. The tanks reached the trench line and, with a terrible roar, passed overhead ... We quickly grasped the idea: it was possible to conceal oneself in a trench from a tank, let it pass right over you, and remain alive."

**No Soviets should fear Hitler's tanks. The Red Army trained its soldiers to keep them mentally strong for the coming battle.**





increasingly well prepared and confidence grew. As one officer put it:

*"At the beginning of the war everything was always done in a hurry and time was always lacking. Now we calmly go into action."*

### SS soldiers rehearse Soviet lines

Despite the diversions, the Soviets could not keep everything hidden from Nazi surveillance aircraft. The Germans knew that stiff resistance awaited them and, while the Soviets rebuilt their strength, the Nazis were similarly engaged in transporting supplies to the front and preparing their troops for battle. The SS Das Reich division even went so far as to have replicas of Soviet defensive lines built based on aerial reconnaissance photos. The German high command also drew up a detailed 'manual' for taking out Soviet positions, the main thrust of which was to disable their anti-tank guns:

*"The numerous anti-tank strongpoints ... detected on aerial photographs have to be dealt with as follows:*

*a) Stuka attack. Immediately exploit the opponent's shock, [when] the last bomb [has exploded], infantry assaults under covering fire from Tiger tanks.*

*b) Concentrated artillery fire on the position. Blinding the anti-tank guns with artillery and Tiger tank guns. Employment of assault detachments. Move in with the tanks. To make sure that the anti-tank emplacements are quickly put out of action, artillery has to closely follow the attacking armoured infantry so that as many batteries are ready to fire at any time."*

Just as the Germans knew about Soviet activities, so the Soviets knew about German preparations.

However, just like the Soviets, the Germans used deception as a tool ahead of the battle. They put on a daytime show that suggested that troops were being redeployed away from the front.

In fact, troops were coming into the area, but at night. The new units were ordered to maintain radio silence. Instead, knowing that the Soviets could intercept their radio communications, the Germans broadcast fake messages about when the attack would take place.

The army needed to move large quantities of equipment because Hitler was betting that weapons technology, rather than numbers of soldiers, would win the battle. On 18th April, three days after he had given the order for Operation Citadel, he outlined his thoughts to Field Marshal Erich von Manstein during a meeting in Zaporozhe, Ukraine:

*"We can't achieve much with men, because we don't have enough. However with a massing of*



**The Soviets' most skilled aviators were now as experienced as Luftwaffe pilots. The elite pilots were sent to Kursk, where the decisive battle would occur.**

*our best and heaviest weapons [we can achieve a breakthrough]."*

The Tiger tank was the most eagerly awaited heavy weapon rolling off German assembly lines. The Germans had high hopes for the sturdy tank, which had massive firepower. However, there was a practical problem with transport. The Tiger had to be delivered to the Eastern Front by rail, but it was wider than the European standard for rail goods. The maximum permissible width, which ensured that the load did not hit trains on the opposite track, platforms or tunnels, was 3.15 metres, but the Tiger was 3.547 metres wide. Therefore, part of the side armour was removed, and narrower caterpillar tracks fitted before the Tiger was loaded. Once the train arrived at the front, the Tiger was driven off the train, and then its missing armour and wider tracks were refitted, preventing it from sinking into soft ground.

### Postponed again

Hitler had set 3rd May as the earliest date for the attack – two days later than the original plan, but the delay was insufficient for some of the officers who were due to lead the offensive. They argued that they lacked equipment, including Tiger tanks, and that the roads were still deplorable due to the April thaw. The attack was postponed again.

During May, Hitler held several meetings with his generals, who had differing opinions on how the attack should be carried out and whether it made any sense at all. One of the sceptics was Colonel-General Guderian, who was responsible for rebuilding and training the new panzer forces. Early in the planning of Operation Citadel, he had tried to talk Hitler out of an attack.

On 10th May 1943, the general met Hitler in Berlin to discuss the delay in Panther tank production. Guderian described in his memoirs how, after the ►





**The fighting was so quiet that the Soviet and German lines were calm for a time. The men passed the time by playing the piano and games of football. They even went to the theatre.**

meeting, he again raised the issue of Operation Citadel with Hitler. By then, the attack was scheduled for 12th June. The latest delay was due to prolonged rain that had closed the roads north of the salient where the 9th Army was located.

*"I seized Hitler's hand and asked him if I might be allowed to speak frankly to him. He said I might and I urged him earnestly to give up the plan for an attack on the Eastern Front; he could already see the difficulties that confronted us; the great commitment would certainly not bring us equivalent gains; our defensive preparations in the West were sure to suffer considerably. I ended with the question: 'Why do you want to attack in the East at all this year?'"*

Several participants in the meeting heard the exchange. Field Marshal Keitel interrupted, saying that Germany had to attack for political reasons. Guderian replied:

*"How many people do you think even know where Kursk is? It's a matter of profound*





*indifference to the world whether we hold Kursk or not. Why do we want to attack in the East at all this year?"*

Hitler was troubled. Despite issuing orders that made Operation Citadel the top priority barely four weeks earlier, he seemed to be having second thoughts. Addressing Guderian, he said:

*"You're quite right. Whenever I think of this attack, my stomach turns over."*

In addition to the late spring rainfall on the Eastern Front, the situation in Italy was a significant concern for Hitler. Intelligence reports claimed that the Allies could land there at any moment. On 19th May, Hitler told a meeting that if Italy surrendered, he would send three SS divisions to the country because "they are most familiar with Fascism".

The three divisions Hitler was thinking of sending to Italy – Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler, Das Reich and Totenkopf – were assigned to lead the offensive during Operation Citadel. Until Hitler felt more at ease with the situation in Southern Europe, the

summer offensive against the Soviet Union was out of the question.

While Hitler struggled to make up his mind, preparations continued on the Eastern Front. The Germans could spend their time reinforcing and organising, but the Soviets also used the time to strengthen their defences.

### Too little, too late

The German leadership only became convinced that reinforcements wouldn't be needed in Italy at the end of June. The Soviet roads were also passable again by then, and waiting for the Soviets to make the first move made no sense. On 25th June, Hitler made his decision. Operation Citadel would launch on 5th July.

The soldiers at the front had prepared themselves – now, there only remained the ominous wait that preceded the order to attack. One SS soldier passed the time by writing in his diary. A few hours before the attack, he noted with grim humour, *"It's time to write my will!"* ■

### FACTS

Hitler knew that an Allied invasion was imminent.

### Greece

was the obvious target in the Führer's mind, but Italy and southern France were also possible landing sites.



*The new German tanks being transported to the front were too wide for the Soviet railways and sometimes for its roads and bridges.*

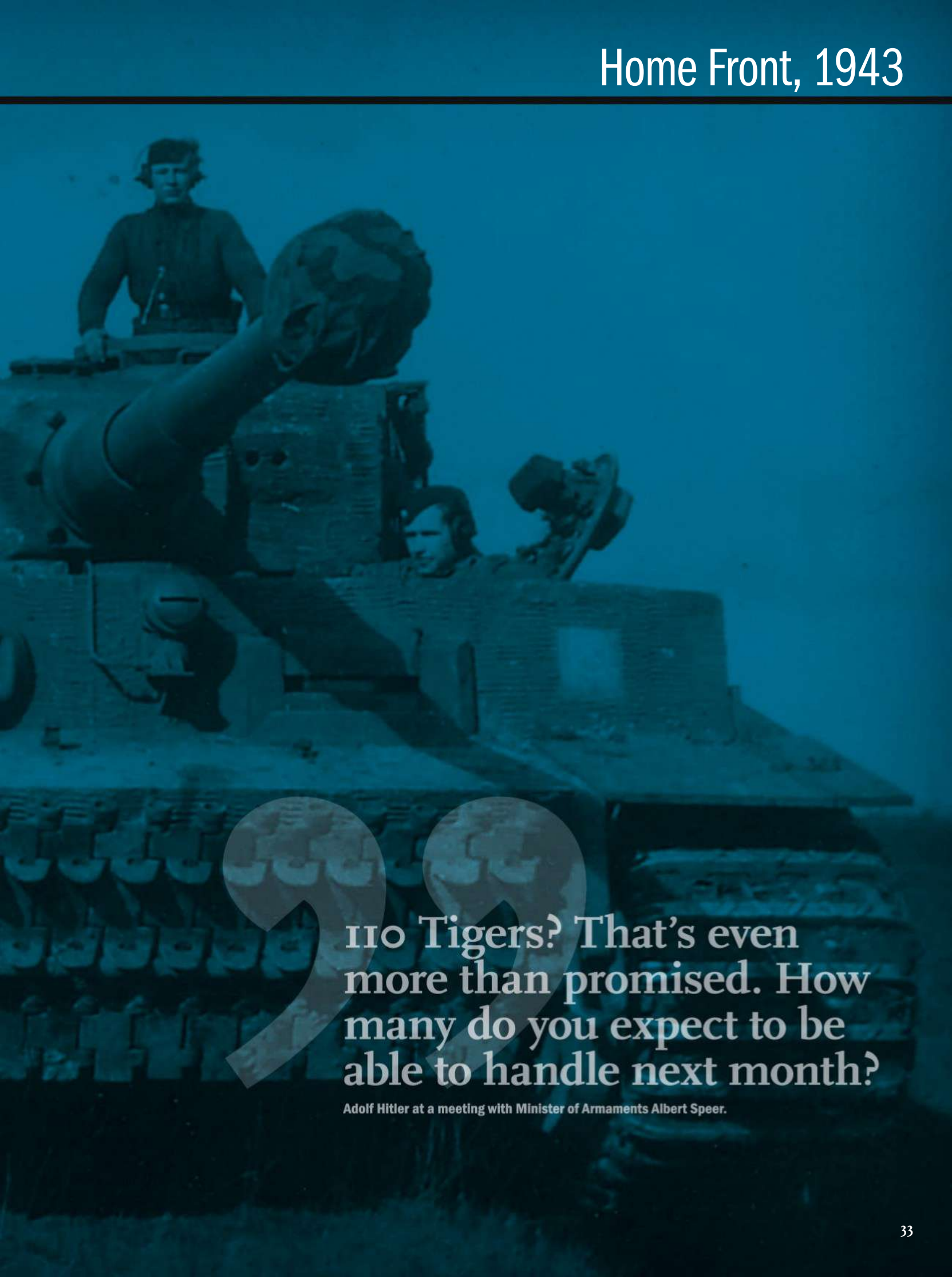




# ARMS RACE TO DECIDE THE WAR

*For two years, the Red Army's T-34 tanks were superior to those of the Germans. The monstrous Tiger tank was set to tip the balance and finally rolled off the assembly line just in time for the Battle of Kursk.*





110 Tigers? That's even more than promised. How many do you expect to be able to handle next month?

Adolf Hitler at a meeting with Minister of Armaments Albert Speer.



# Arms race to decide the war

**In 1943 Hitler was nervous. The Blitzkrieg against the Soviet Union had become stuck, and he decided that only new wonder weapons could save Germany. Only two things counted to the Führer: size and thick armour. In Moscow, Stalin also dreamed of new weapons to secure victory against German planes and tanks.**

By Henrik Nordskilde

**R**eich Minister of Armaments and War Production Albert Speer was well aware of Hitler's infamous bedtime reading: a large book in red binding with yellow diagonal stripes, containing all the information on the German arsenal the Führer could wish for.

*"It was a catalogue, continually being brought up to date, of from 30 to 50 different types of ammunition and ordnance. He kept it on his night table. Sometimes he would order a servant to bring the book down when in the course of military conferences an assistant had mentioned a figure which Hitler instantly corrected. The book was opened and Hitler's data would be confirmed, without fail, every time, while the general would be shown to be in error,"* Speer later wrote of his meetings with Hitler, where the red book was produced and used to plan new offensives on all fronts as well as control German war production, of which the Führer imagined he knew every detail.

Hitler's ability to memorise numbers created fear among those around him, but otherwise Hitler's powers of recall were of little significance. Often, the Führer's obsession with detail hampered his ability to maintain an overview and lay out a broad strategy for the conduct of the war.

*"The real expert sensibly does not burden his mind with details that he can look up or leave to an assistant. Hitler, however, felt it necessary for his own self-esteem to parade his knowledge. But he also enjoyed doing it,"* Speer recalled.

A review was needed in 1942, when Speer took office as the new armaments minister. German war production was poor and disorganised, and the army was running out of supplies and weapons after gruelling battles on the Eastern Front and in Africa. When Speer took up his post, he may have had his sights set on boosting war production, but he also concentrated on avoiding the Führer's displeasure.

Speer had seen generals fall into the trap so many times that he himself had no desire to be exposed by Hitler's skill for memorising military trivia – never mind his fondness for demonstrating his knowledge. Speer's predecessor, Fritz Todt, who died in a plane crash near Ulveskansen in February 1942, occasionally brought a single expert to meetings with Hitler, but Speer stepped up his game. When the minister of armaments flew every two or three weeks

to Hitler's headquarters at Ulveskansen in East Prussia or in Ukraine, he made sure that he was accompanied by up to 20 civilian advisers, each an expert in his field.

Depending on the topics Hitler raised at meetings, experts were invited to the table to explain details about a particular gun, the armour of a tank or something else entirely. In this way, Speer avoided having to deal with questions he couldn't answer from memory. Even so, he couldn't entirely avoid having to deal with the Führer's wishes for rearmament, which were ambitious but one-sided.

## **Hitler obsessed by thick armour**

In the spring of 1943, German weapons development was at its highest ever. Germany had suffered more





casualties than anyone imagined, and the number of potential recruits was dropping to critical levels. The debilitating war in the Soviet Union demanded new types of weapons that could both save lives and resources, and the thought of not losing any more of his precious tanks haunted Hitler, who never held back from interfering with the engineers' work.

The Führer had opinions on everything from the thickness of tank armour to the range of guns. For example, the newly developed Tiger tank was modified and delayed because Hitler valued armour and firepower over speed and manoeuvrability: in its original design, the Tiger weighed 50 tonnes, but after Hitler's adjustments, the weight was as much as 75 tonnes. As a direct consequence, Speer had to start developing a new, lighter model, which was christened the Panther tank. Weighing only 30 tonnes, combined with the same engine as the Tiger, it was fast and manoeuvrable, as its name suggested. But over the course of a year, Hitler demanded more

and more armour to make the precious tanks invulnerable, and eventually even the little Panther was "fattened up" to weigh 48 tonnes.

This obsession with armour became so fanatical that when Hitler inspected a wooden model of a gigantic tank code-named *Maus* (Mouse) in May 1943, he wanted even more armour on the already unrealistically heavy tank model. The demand was impossible; no engine in the world could pull the huge, heavy tank, which had been designed solely to satisfy Hitler's armour needs. Having demonstrated this, Speer hoped the Führer would then agree to the development of lighter tanks. The *Maus*'s growth also frustrated Inspector General of Armoured Troops Heinz Guderian, who witnessed first-hand the development of other tanks being delayed.

*"Its total weight was supposed to be 175 tonnes; it must therefore be assumed that, after Hitler had ordered his usual supplementary changes to the initial design, it would weigh nearer 200▶*

**Albert Speer inspects the front near the Crimea in 1943. As Hitler's armaments minister, Speer tried to understand the army's most important needs.**







## TANK HUNTER

Panzerkampfwagen V Panther

# The (almost) perfect tank

Although the Tiger took the honours, its little brother, the Panther, was the tank the men loved and enemies feared. The tank was fast and heavily armoured, had incredible firepower and only one weakness: its thin side armour.

**T**he Panther tank was developed specifically to take on the Soviet T-34. Although it had some teething problems, particularly with the suspension, both the Germans and their enemies considered the Panther one of the very best tanks of the war.

The German car manufacturers MAN and Daimler-Benz were responsible for its development, prioritising firepower, speed

and armour. Up to 20 tonnes lighter than its big brother, the Tiger, the Panther had the same engine and could reach a top speed of 55 km/h, faster than the smaller T-34 as well as other Allied tanks.

Its relatively light weight also enabled the Panther tank to traverse difficult terrain better than the larger Tiger, while the armament was the same. Indeed, both tanks were equipped

with the most feared gun of the war, the German 88-mm, which was used both on tanks, as a stand-alone gun and for anti-aircraft fire.

The front armour was reinforced, and the Soviet anti-tank crews soon discovered that they could only disable the Panther by hitting it on the side, where the armour layer was somewhat thinner to keep the weight down.

**WIDTH:** 3.27 metres  
**HEIGHT:** 2.99 metres  
**WEIGHT:** 44 tonnes  
**FUEL TANK:** 720 litres

**OPERATIONAL RANGE:** 200 km on the road, 150 km off-road.

**CREW:** The tank had room to accommodate five men – inside were the driver, gunner, commander, radio operator and a loader.

**ENGINE:** Originally two Porsche engines, later replaced by two 690-hp Maybach engines.



**WEAPON:** A 6.3-metre 88-mm gun. With standard ammunition, the Panther could pierce 13-cm armour at 2,000 metres. Later, after the Battle of Kursk, the tank was upgraded with two 7.92-mm machine guns and thicker armour.

**IN BRITISH SERVICE:** After World War II, German factories were ordered to produce Panther tanks for the British Army. So sought after was the German tank that even arch-enemy France chose to use German-made Panther tanks after the war.

**ARMOUR, FRONT:** 10 cm  
**ARMOUR, SIDE:** 3 cm



tonnes,” wrote Guderian, who also believed the model was missing a crucial weapon: *“But the model displayed carried no machine guns for close-range fighting. For this reason I had to turn it down.”*

According to Guderian’s assessment, it was inevitable that a tank would need a machine gun, especially if it was to work with infantry forces.

*“Our discussion grew heated,”* Guderian wrote of the incident, where he was the only one in the audience to express his dislike of the monster tank.

### Officers loved speed

Despite Hitler’s infatuation, the Maus never went into production, but these blind alleys delayed the manufacture of the new Tiger and Panther tanks, which Guderian and his fellow generals considered important weapons for turning the tide of war. The Panther, in particular, seemed to offer a good solution for offensive-minded German officers who wanted speed and manoeuvrability.

But even having gained weight from Hitler’s input, the tank was a good weapon; equipped with a 75-mm gun, it could penetrate the armour of the Soviet T-34 tank, and the design was inspired by the sloping armour plates of the T-34, where shells tended to bounce off rather than penetrate on impact. There were, however, several teething problems. Because of its increased weight, the tank had inadequate



suspension, and the vehicle’s heavy steel frame compromised both drive shaft and sight instruments. Guderian advised Hitler against putting the Panther into action on the Eastern Front, and also expressed concerns about the even heavier Tiger.

Guderian estimated that the Tiger was not yet sufficiently tested and also lacked trained manpower with sufficient combat experience. It was too risky to send crews that were not able to fully exploit the ►

**Albert Speer inspects new aircraft with chief designer Willy Messerschmitt. In one year, Speer dramatically increased German war production efficiency.**

**The number of tanks produced by the factories doubled from 5,000 in 1942 to more than 11,000 in 1943.**





**Vehicles and guns**  
quickly wore out in the  
Soviet Union's dusty  
and muddy terrain,  
where the army lacked  
spare parts for repairs.



tank's strengths or deal with any weaknesses the tank might have in combat, Guderian argued.

*"They were simply not yet ready to go to the front,"* was the inspector general's assessment of the Panther.

But Guderian had to yield. Hitler was determined that both the Panther and Tiger would play a decisive role in the attack on the Kursk salient, and by May 1943 production of Tigers was increased sixfold compared to when the first ones left the factories in August 1942. At the same time, the Panther was close to going into production.

### Hitler had unrealistic expectations

Although the Tiger and Panther were close to being sent to the front, the new tanks did not satisfy Hitler's need for new weapons. The Führer demanded further development and scaling up to mass production of the new weapons in the spring of 1943, when everything was

at stake. The Führer's demands put pressure on the arms industry, and Speer was forced to run numerous projects in parallel. In his autobiography, Speer described how Chief of the Army Staff Walther Buhle experienced Hitler's insistence on new production, especially heavy tanks and guns, during a meeting, and how the general listened incredulously to Hitler's expectations of production time and numbers that the factories could churn out.

*"Hitler sent for General Buhle and demanded: 'I have just heard that an enemy tank is coming along with armour far beyond anything we have. Have you any documentation of that? If it is true, a new anti-tank gun must be developed instantly. We must begin reacting immediately. Instantly.'"*

In his eagerness, the Führer summoned Speer every month to receive the latest production figures. Speer always recited them in a certain order so that Hitler could write the figures meticulously in a table and record the most important figures in his red book.

Speer later described the conversations:

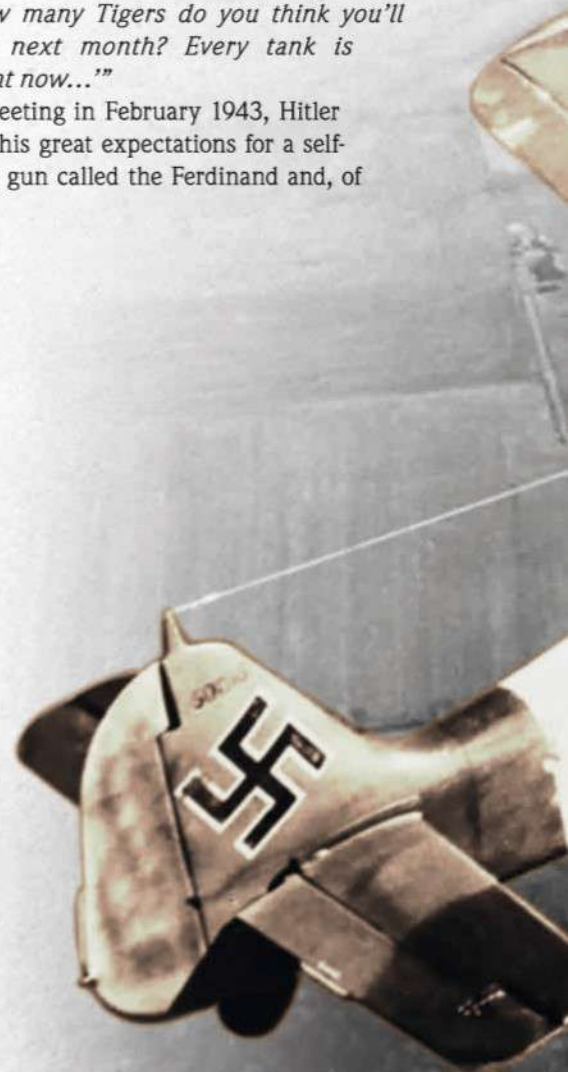
*"Hitler usually received them with exclamations such as: 'Very good! Why, that's wonderful. 110 Tigers? That's more than you promised... And how many Tigers do you think you'll manage next month? Every tank is important now...'"*

At a meeting in February 1943, Hitler spoke of his great expectations for a self-propelled gun called the Ferdinand and, of



### ALBERT SPEER (1905-1981)

was appointed minister of armaments in 1942 and was responsible for Germany's war production in its most crucial years. A close friend of Adolf Hitler, Speer had been a member of the Nazi Party and its chief architect since 1931. Speer was sentenced to 20 years in prison for his role in the war at the Nuremberg trials in 1946.





## By early May, we'll have 98 heavy self-propelled guns built by Porsche. ■ Hitler's expectant boast about German rearmament in 1943.

course, the Tiger and Panther tanks. He claimed that by early May there would be 98 heavy self-propelled guns built by Porsche, plus 150 new Tiger tanks and 200-250 Panther tanks. As if that weren't enough, Hitler also predicted another 50 heavy self-propelled infantry guns, 100 tanks with flamethrowers and a number of Panzer IV tanks. Hitler boasted of the weapons' indestructibility and unmatched firepower, claiming Porsche's gun could disable an enemy tank at 2,000 metres. With this huge build-up of the latest weapons, he argued, it must be possible to regain the initiative on the Eastern Front.

### Hitler prioritised new tanks over parts

Albert Speer and Heinz Guderian occasionally spoke about their frustrations with Hitler's one-sided focus on mass production of new tanks and guns. He was less concerned with the need to produce and supply spare parts quickly enough.

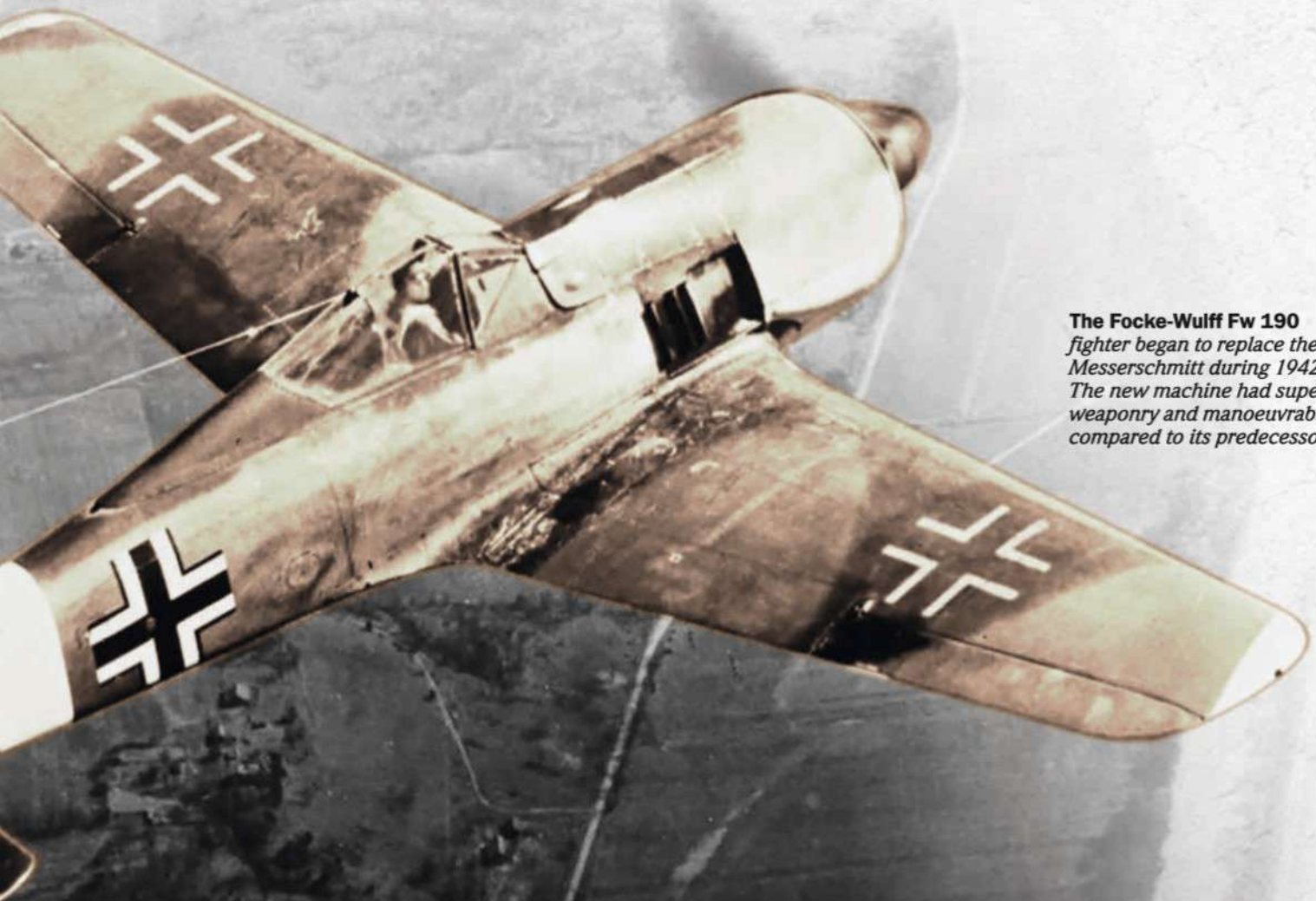
*"General Guderian ... frequently pointed out to me that if we could repair our tanks quickly, thanks to sufficient spare parts, we could have*

*more available for battle, at a fraction of the cost, than by producing new ones. But Hitler insisted on the priority of new production, which would have had to be reduced by 20 percent if we made provision for such repairs."*

Such a reduction in production was unacceptable to Hitler. Speer soon learned that his boss was more interested in talking about production and the development of new weapons than what happened on the battlefield. Especially when bad news arrived from the front, as it often did in 1942-43.

*"It often seemed to me that Hitler used these prolonged conferences on armaments and war production as an escape from his military responsibilities. He admitted that he found them a relaxation similar to our former conferences on architecture. Even in crisis situations, he devoted many hours to such discussions, sometimes refusing to interrupt them even when his field marshals or ministers urgently wanted to speak with him."*

By 1943, Germany was at the limit of its capacity to produce munitions, and Speer began advocating ►



**The Focke-Wulf Fw 190** fighter began to replace the Messerschmitt during 1942. The new machine had superior weaponry and manoeuvrability compared to its predecessor.



## In the spring of 1943, Speer had an acute problem keeping the wheels of the arms industry turning.

that industry in German-occupied countries help with weapons production. Specifically, those factories in Eastern Europe, France, the Netherlands and Belgium capable of producing consumer goods such as clothing and furniture for the German civilian population. In this way, Speer could free up resources in the German factories, which would then have room to concentrate on arms production.

At first, the plans did not curry much support from Hitler, who actually had opposing ideas when it came to production in occupied countries. The Führer dreamt of deindustrialising Eastern Europe in particular, where he believed industrialisation promoted Communism and created an undesirable group of intellectuals. Later Hitler changed his mind, but by spring 1943, Speer had an acute problem keeping the wheels of the arms industry turning. German factories were largely engaged in producing goods for the civilian population, while the war demanded tanks, submarines and other resource-intensive materiel. On top of this, a shortage of labour for the factories was becoming acute.

### Chance remark saved the war industry

Speer found a solution to the labour shortage during a modest dinner in the back room of the Reich Chancellery in Berlin. Here the armaments minister heard a remark that concerned and interested him. The head of Hitler's bodyguards, Sepp Dietrich, was present and mentioned that the Führer was ready to issue an order that no prisoners be taken in connection with the attack at Kursk. SS troops had shortly before reported to the Führer that the Red Army had killed German prisoners of war, and Hitler immediately declared that the enemy must repay in blood by the thousand. Speer sat shocked at the dinner table when he heard what Dietrich had said. The prospect of so many prisoners being executed

seemed pointless when they could instead be put to work in Germany. Here, the Nazis had already been 'creative' in boosting production. Even before the outbreak of war, Germany had established labour camps staffed by Jews, Communists, homosexuals, criminals and the homeless. In Poland alone, the Nazis set up 457 camps, just as a large number of German companies used slave labour. Together, the forced labourers made up a quarter of the workforce, but there was still a shortage of hands, so Speer decided to intervene after hearing that Soviet prisoners of war at Kursk would be shot on the spot.

*"Hitler was counting on hundreds of thousands of prisoners. For months we had been trying in vain to close a gap of hundreds of thousands in the supply of labour. I therefore took the first opportunity to reason with Hitler on this score. It was not difficult to persuade him to reconsider; he seemed rather relieved... That same day, 8th July 1943, he had Keitel prepare instructions to the effect that all prisoners must be sent into armaments production."*

Now the goal was the opposite of the original plan. For the army, it became about taking as many prisoners as possible to help with production. Soviet civilians from German-occupied areas were also included in the calculations, all so Speer could secure enough workers. In what was dubbed the Eastern Workers Programme, civilians were 'evacuated' from the Soviet Union to serve as slave labourers in German industry.

In 1943, Olga, a Ukrainian girl in her late teens, wrote in her diary about the day she and her sister were told they were to be sent from her home town, Znamianka, to Germany. First, the girls had to undergo a medical examination to determine their suitability for forced labour.

*"Oh! What a horror... What is happening to me? I am like a crazy person, screaming at everyone and cursing my dear mother... But here I am at the doctor's... [My sister] will not have to go... But what about me?"*

Before the investigation, Olga, like many others, considered drastic measures to avoid being sent away. Between February 1942 and July 1943, more than 1,000 young people in the city harmed themselves, while 1,121 others ended up in German factories.

*"I am going to make myself sick only so that I cannot pass the commission and will not have to go THERE! Oh! If only all of these woes would soon end! Well I am not really afraid to go but if it weren't for my mother, father... They do not want to make me drink poison! To drink cooked tobacco so that I become unhealthy."*

Luckily, however, Olga managed to convince a doctor to agree that she had to stay in her home town for health reasons. The prisoners sent to Germany ►

Hitler had several headquarters close to the front. Here he meets with air force officers in Ukraine to get an update.





## WHY THE GERMAN ARMS INDUSTRY WAS...

### ...not prepared for a long war

Nazi leaders were both proponents of short wars and convinced that Germany's modern army and superior generals could crush any enemy in a matter of months. They therefore saw no need for the massive production of new equipment.

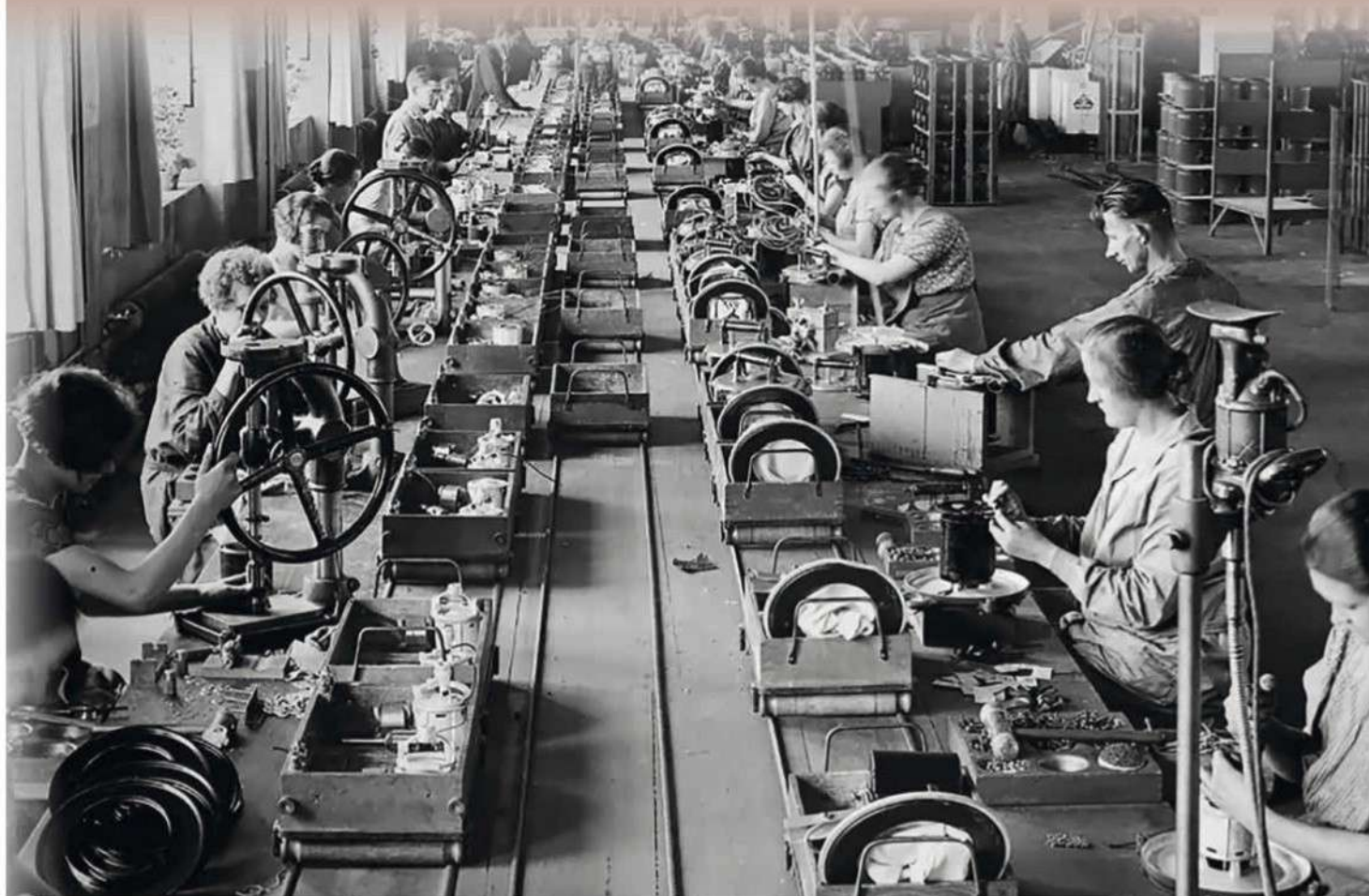
**A**t the beginning of World War II, the German armaments industry was not very large compared to later in the war. Some historians argue the slow start was due to Hitler's long-held belief that all wars could be won quickly. Therefore, Germany did not need to devote large resources to the production of weapons and equipment for a protracted war. The Germans did indeed manage to occupy most of Western Europe without putting much strain on industry, but with the Soviet campaign and its

exhausting need for supplies, by 1942 Germany was dangerously close to running out of tanks, planes, guns and ammunition. As the war went from bad to worse for the Germans, a greater proportion of industry was dedicated to war production, and targeted so that each factory had a very specific role.

In 1942, when Albert Speer became minister of armaments, the Germans felt the pressure on the Eastern Front just as the United States entered the war. As a result,

Germany had to speed up its factories, and by the end of the year a third of industrial output was weapons production. From there the country switched to a full war economy, with virtually all production devoted to the armaments industry. Civilian goods had to be given lower priority – clothing, for example, was phased out. Instead, centres were set up where citizens could barter for clothes. The new priorities helped. From 1942 to 1944, German war production doubled.

**Women took the men's place in factories. But only slowly, as Nazi ideals steered women towards looking after homes and children.**





# Everyday life on the Eastern Front

Throughout the spring and early summer of 1943, the Eastern Front was quiet. For the soldiers, the peace enabled them to enjoy plays, concerts and, for the lucky ones, even love. But only for a few months.


**O**n 15th March 1943, German troops retook Kharkov in eastern Ukraine, ending the Soviet winter offensive. Since the Battle of Stalingrad, the Germans had been on the back foot, but now a strange peace settled over the thousands of kilometres of front

line. Both Germans and Soviets gathered strength after the exhaustive fighting, and a kind of peaceful everyday life settled in for soldiers on both sides of the front.

While the two armies awaited new recruits and weapons for the next offensive, soldiers enjoyed the spring sunshine in the trenches and were entertained by performances from famous actors and singers who were ferried by plane and train

from Moscow and Berlin to the quiet front more than 1,000 km away.

Love also flourished – albeit from a distance. Soldiers could arrange long-distance weddings, where bride and groom said yes to each other at the same time and with the same words as at a normal wedding. The marriage triggered no special bonuses or holidays, but still brought joy to the German soldiers in the Soviet Union for some rare quiet months.



**Field priests and officers performed long-distance weddings in their thousands in June 1943. In addition to boosting soldiers' morale, the marriages ensured that lovers in Germany received a pension if their new husbands died at the front.**



were not only used in the production of tanks, guns and submarines. The Luftwaffe also required factories to supply new equipment. During the Battle of Stalingrad, the Germans lost air supremacy for the first time; 500 planes were shot down, and the losses meant not only a lack of aircraft, but also a shortage of experienced pilots. In the Soviet attack that formed the advance at Kursk, the Soviets had 2,000 aircraft to the Germans' 400.

Yet the Germans believed they had a trump card. The Focke-Wulf Fw 190 fighter, developed in 1939 and put into service in 1941, had proved to be one of the best fighters of World War II. It was fast, with a top speed of 660 km/h, and could compete with enemy fighters such as the Spitfire. At the same time, with two 7.9-mm machine guns in the nose and a pair of twin 20-mm autocannons in each wing, the aircraft was heavily armed and suitable for attacks against ground targets. The machine could even be adapted to carry up to four additional 20-mm cannons, mortars or 500-kg bombs. In addition, the Fw 190 had a wide landing gear, which made the aircraft more stable when landing on uneven runways in war zones, as well as an air-cooled engine – a rarity on the battlefield.

Not all engineers were in favour of air-cooled engines in fighter aircraft. Normally, it would be necessary to leave a large part of the front of the aircraft open to ensure sufficient airflow and thus cooling. Such a design created considerable wind resistance, but the man who created Focke-Wulf, engineer and test pilot Kurt Tank, had solved the problem, in part by using a hole in the nose from which air was directed into the engine.

The solution ensured that the German pilots had the increased security of an air-cooled engine. While a single projectile in a water-cooled engine could puncture the entire system and cause the engine to overheat, the Focke-Wulf Fw 190 could continue flying even if its engine was hit. Kurt Tank's desire to create a safer machine stemmed from personal experience:

*"During World War I, I served in the cavalry and in the infantry. I had seen the harsh conditions under which military equipment had to work in wartime. I felt sure that a quite different breed of fighter would also have a place in any future conflict: one that could operate from ill-prepared front-line airfields; one that could be flown and maintained by men who had received only short training; and one that could absorb a reasonable amount of battle damage and still get back."*

### **Soviets knew Hitler's secret**

Despite having been outnumbered in previous summer offensives yet still managing to push the Red Army back, there was good reason for extra preparation before the attack at the Kursk pocket. The army had lost nearly 8,000 tanks since June 1941 and

by the end of January 1943 had only 495 operational tanks spread across the Eastern Front. Reinforcements did arrive, but during the first three months of 1943 alone, the Germans lost a further 2,529 tanks. Most of them were Panzer III and IV, which despite upgrades were no match for the Soviet T-34 model.

At one point, German General Gerd von Rundstedt called the T-34 the world's best tank, but by 1943 it was inferior to the firepower of the gun on a Tiger – the tank that Hitler, along with the Panther, relied on.

The Soviets – without the knowledge of the Germans – had strong intelligence about the two new tanks and were particularly aware of the thick armour of the Tiger. T-34 crews were trained not to fire at them from too far away. The official reason was to save ammunition, but the reality – unknown to the crews – was that the T-34's gun could not penetrate the armour of a Tiger tank unless it fired from a very specific angle and at only a few hundred metres' range.

Conversely, a Tiger could disable a T-34 from up to 1,500 metres away. On the other hand, the T-34, with its low weight and wide caterpillar feet, was perfect on soft ground. This was especially important because, twice a year on the Eastern Front, there were periods when the ground turned to mud after snowmelt in spring and heavy rains in autumn. In addition, the T-34's sloping armour plates made it resistant to shelling – shells bounced off the sloped plates or did not penetrate completely because the ►

**During the month of June, soldiers put away their weapons and uniform jackets and instead relaxed and recharged their batteries.**





shell had to travel through more centimetres of the sloping armour than if it hit a vertical surface. The T-34 was also fast, constructed using simple mechanics that made it easy to both produce and repair, plus it enjoyed a wide range of action. In other words, it was Stalin's wonder weapon.

### **Soviets received help from the US**

Stalin's second wonder weapon was the quantity of supplies. Soviet factories were churning out weapons, and the war industry was also helped by the US, which lent military equipment to the Red Army. The supplies allowed Soviet factories to concentrate on producing tanks and self-propelled guns, just as US supplies of transport aircraft allowed factories to focus on building fighters and bombers. And the industrial workload was immense in the months leading up to

Operation Citadel, if Georgy Zhukov, marshal of the Soviet Union, was to be believed:

*"Despite the loss of a substantial part of the crucial economic areas, of their factories and mills, our people laboured selflessly to provide the Soviet armies with the necessary means of waging war. By the end of 1942 the country had been turned into a huge military camp. Soviet people saw it as their duty to do everything possible for victory," Zhukov wrote.*

In the Kursk region, civilians not only helped build defences, but they repaired aircraft, tanks and military vehicles, or sewed uniforms for the army,





too. Zhukov later described civilians' efforts and their importance in grand terms:

*"Each person did everything he or she possibly could to contribute to victory. The community of the goals of our people and the Armed Forces in the fight to save their socialist Motherland was thereby manifested... In May and June intensive preparations were being made for battle among all the troops serving on the ground and in the air, every single man and officer getting ready to meet the enemy. And this encounter soon took place..."*

On 4th July, late in the evening, several captured Germans reported that the German Kursk offensive was

scheduled to begin around 03.00 on 5th July. Zhukov was in the company of General Konstantin Rokossovsky when he received the information. At the meeting, Rokossovsky asked Zhukov if he thought they should inform the General Staff or immediately prepare the artillery for a pre-emptive attack. Zhukov replied firmly:

*"We won't waste time. Give the order as stipulated in the plan of the Front and the Stavka, and I'll ring Stalin right away."*

Stalin agreed with the decision. The Red Army must forestall the Germans with a massive bombardment. Zhukov and Rokossovsky then drove to the headquarters nearest the front, where there was a flurry of activity. Telephones rang constantly as final preparations were made. And then at 02.20 on 5th July 1943, the final attack order came. Zhukov called it a symphony from hell. He was right. ■

**The Tiger tank reached the battlefield in 1943. It was the Germans' great hope but was so difficult to maintain that it proved unsuitable for fighting on the Eastern Front.**





By Henrik Elling

# Japan did not have the strength to help

As the war on the Eastern Front turned against the Germans, Hitler increasingly insisted that Japan come to the rescue by invading the Soviet Union. But military flare-ups in the 1930s had shaken the empire, which lacked the men for a costly invasion.

**Can you tell us what relations were like between Japan and the Soviet Union when World War II broke out?**

*When World War II broke out in Europe on 1st September 1939, Japan and the Soviet Union were already in a state of war, albeit undeclared. The two countries' armies were fighting on the border between Soviet-backed Mongolia and Japanese-controlled Manchukuo, both puppet states in Northeast Asia.*

*The Japanese named the fiercely fought clashes after the village of Nomonhan, while the Soviets called them the Battles of Khalkhin Gol. The year before, the two powers had fought another small war on the border between the Soviet Union, Manchukuo and Korea.*

*In other words, relations between the two countries were extremely tense, existing in the grey zone between war and peace. The dispute was mainly ideological: Japan, like Western countries, saw Communism as a severe threat to its social order and feared revolution at home. But there were also historical factors at play.*

*The two countries had been rivals since before the creation of the Soviet Union. The Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05 was still fresh in the minds of both nations, and for many senior officers, the conflict had left a lasting mark. For example, the famous Japanese Admiral Yamamoto*

*Isoroku took part as a young naval officer and lost two fingers to a Soviet shell.*

**Soviet President Mikhail Kalinin spoke of the Soviets needing to prepare for an inevitable war on two fronts against Japan and Germany as early as 1937. How did he know?**

*In the years following the Russian Revolution of 1917, the new Marxist regime in Moscow was too weak to do much more than maintain a makeshift defence along its easternmost frontier. That situation changed in the early 1930s. On the one hand, the Soviet regime now had the surplus means to expand its military defences in the Far East; on the other, it was being stirred into action by an increasingly expansionist Japan. The Soviets saw the Japanese Empire as a growing threat, not least after its occupation of three Manchurian provinces in north-east China in 1931 and 1932, and the establishment of the Japanese puppet state, Manchukuo.*

*The result of these efforts was that in the summer of 1941, the Red Army maintained up to 48 divisions in the two regions relevant in this context: the Far Eastern Front and the Transbaikal Military District. It is also worth noting that the Soviet Union expanded its railway network around this time, making it possible to*

**The Soviet Air Force took part in battles against the Japanese in 1939, but it soon proved itself obsolete.**







send reinforcements, in the form of men and equipment, to the Far Eastern areas far more quickly than before.

### **How did the Japanese react when Germany invaded the Soviet Union?**

*The Germans launched the invasion on 22nd June 1941 without informing their Japanese allies of the details. Japan knew an attack was imminent, but the Germans kept the exact date to themselves. So there was some disappointment and irritation in Tokyo. Moreover, the Japanese government was disgruntled because the German attack ran counter to the foreign policy line Japan had been pursuing in recent months, which was one of cautious rapprochement with the Soviet*

*Union. The attack was also bad news for Japan's attempts to reach an understanding with the United States in the Pacific region. The Americans decided to side with the Soviets, both morally and, eventually, materially.*

*Japan, by virtue of its alliance with Germany, was placed in opposition to the United States. In this way, the German-Soviet war indirectly clarified Japanese-American enmity. However, some Japanese decision-makers welcomed the German attack, believing it gave Japan a unique chance to defeat its Russian arch-enemy once and for all. Among them was Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yosuke, who felt Japan could not afford to sit on the sidelines ▶*

**Mongolian Soviets in battle on the border of Japan's puppet state Manchukuo in 1939. The quantities of Soviet men and equipment frightened the Japanese.**

### **PETER HARMSSEN (born 1968)**

Peter Harmsen is a National Taiwan University graduate who majored in Chinese language and history. He has written several international bestsellers on World War II on the Asian front, including *Shanghai 1937: Stalingrad on the Yangtze* about the Japanese invasion of Shanghai and *Japan Runs Wild 1942-43 (War in the Far East)*.





and watch. As he said, "We must either shed our blood or embark on diplomacy. And it's better to shed blood."

### **Do you know whether Hitler pushed for a Siberian Front?**

*During the summer and autumn of 1941, Tokyo received somewhat contradictory signals from Berlin. The German foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, repeatedly urged Japan to attack the Soviet Union through the Japanese ambassador in Berlin and the German ambassador in Tokyo. The German foreign minister's appeals became more insistent as it grew clear that the war in the Soviet Union would not end nearly as quickly as the Germans had predicted.*

*Hitler, on the other hand, was more lukewarm about the idea. On the one hand, he was overconfident, especially at first, and thought he could easily handle the Soviets by himself. On the other hand, he doubted that the Japanese were capable of waging a victorious land war against the Soviet Union after their failure at Nomohan two years earlier. Moreover, he feared that Japanese involvement in the eastern Soviet Union would weaken Japan's ability to fight the United States and Britain in the Pacific.*

### **Stalin must have felt some level of threat from Japan throughout the war. What was the Soviet leader's understanding of Japanese intentions?**

*In July and August 1941, the Japanese military doubled the forces deployed along Manchukuo's border with the Soviet Union, so there were good reasons for Stalin to be nervous. Yet he regarded the situation with a certain serenity because, in the summer and autumn of 1941, he knew precisely what Japan's intentions were thanks to the German-born spy Richard Sorge, who moved in the highest circles of Tokyo in his assumed role as a journalist.*

*From the first critical days of summer, Sorge was able to send reassuring messages to Stalin that there was no imminent danger of a Japanese attack. In July, he reported that the Japanese leaders had adopted a wait-and-see attitude and would hold off to see if the Soviet Union suffered a catastrophic defeat before deciding to intervene. By September, Sorge could quote several sources in the Japanese capital who claimed that a Japanese attack in 1941 was virtually out of the question. By early October, he*

*was sending news that Japan had begun withdrawing its forces from the Soviet border.*

### **In the autumn and winter of 1941, the Red Army moved hundreds of thousands of soldiers from Siberia to Moscow. Given the reasonably realistic threat posed by a hostile Japan, how did they dare to do that?**

*The news from Sorge in Tokyo helped Stalin to play it cool. He knew that a Japanese invasion was not imminent, and from September onwards, he was aware that a Japanese attack, if it came at all, would not happen in 1941.*

*At the same time, drawing the Siberian divisions westwards during the autumn and winter to join Moscow's defence did not leave a vacuum because the Soviet military authorities in the Far East were busy raising new units. Consequently, the Red Army was able, at least in quantitative terms, to maintain its forces at the levels recorded before the German offensive and even increase them slightly during the second half of 1941. Whereas the Soviet Union had 48 divisions in the east in June 1941, that figure had risen to 51 by January 1942. Of course, they were not qualitatively equal to the divisions sent to fight the Germans, but they were sufficient for a robust defence.*

### **In 1941, the Soviet Union was under severe pressure from the German invasion. Why didn't the Japanese choose to attack?**

*Basically, it was because the Japanese Imperial Navy said no. The naval leadership was busy securing oil and other raw materials in Southeast Asia through diplomacy or war, and it did not need an attention-seeking adventure in the north. Parts of the army were more positive about the idea of an attack, and some senior officers were outright enthusiastic, but even here, there was a note of caution.*

*Minister of War Tojo Hideki, who was also a general in the army, was against any attack until the Soviet Union had been run through by the Germans and was ready to "fall to the ground like a ripe persimmon" fruit, as he put it. After two defeats by Soviet troops in 1938 and 1939, the Japanese army was extremely cautious about engaging in a new land war with its northern neighbour. Nor should it be overlooked that just as a Japanese attack on the Soviet Union would have embroiled Stalin in a two-front war, so Japan itself would end up fighting on two fronts. The*



**In July and August 1941, the Japanese military doubled the forces deployed along Manchukuo's border with the Soviet Union.**

*empire had been locked in a hopeless conflict in China since 1937, and the last thing the Japanese generals needed was another endless war.*

**In your view, how would the war between Japan and the Soviet Union have gone if Japan had invaded? And what would the invasion have meant for Germany's chances of victory?**

*Now we are moving into the realms of alternate history, where we can only rely on historical facts to a certain extent. But my view is that a Japanese attack on the Soviet Union would not have had much impact on the outcome of the German-Soviet war. A Japanese attack would not have stretched along the entire 5,000-kilometre border between the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo and the Soviet Union. Japan simply didn't have sufficient resources for that.*

*Instead, the Japanese would have deployed up to 25 divisions on the easternmost part of the shared border, towards the Soviet Primorsky Krai region and the port city of Vladivostok. We know that's how it would have happened because detailed Japanese plans have been preserved. The Japanese offensive would probably have stalled and ended in a war of attrition. The Soviet Union could have easily tolerated such a conflict because its force was at least equal to the one it would have opposed, even after redeploying several divisions to the defence of Moscow. Moreover, even if the Japanese had succeeded in occupying larger areas in the easternmost part of the Soviet Union, it was a price Stalin was prepared to pay to ensure that Moscow remained in Soviet hands.*

**What would a Japanese-Soviet war have meant for the course of World War II?**

*While a Japanese attack would not have decisively changed the outcome of Germany's war with the*

*Soviet Union, it would, in my view, have led to a completely different situation in the Pacific and thus could have decisively changed the course of World War II as a whole.*

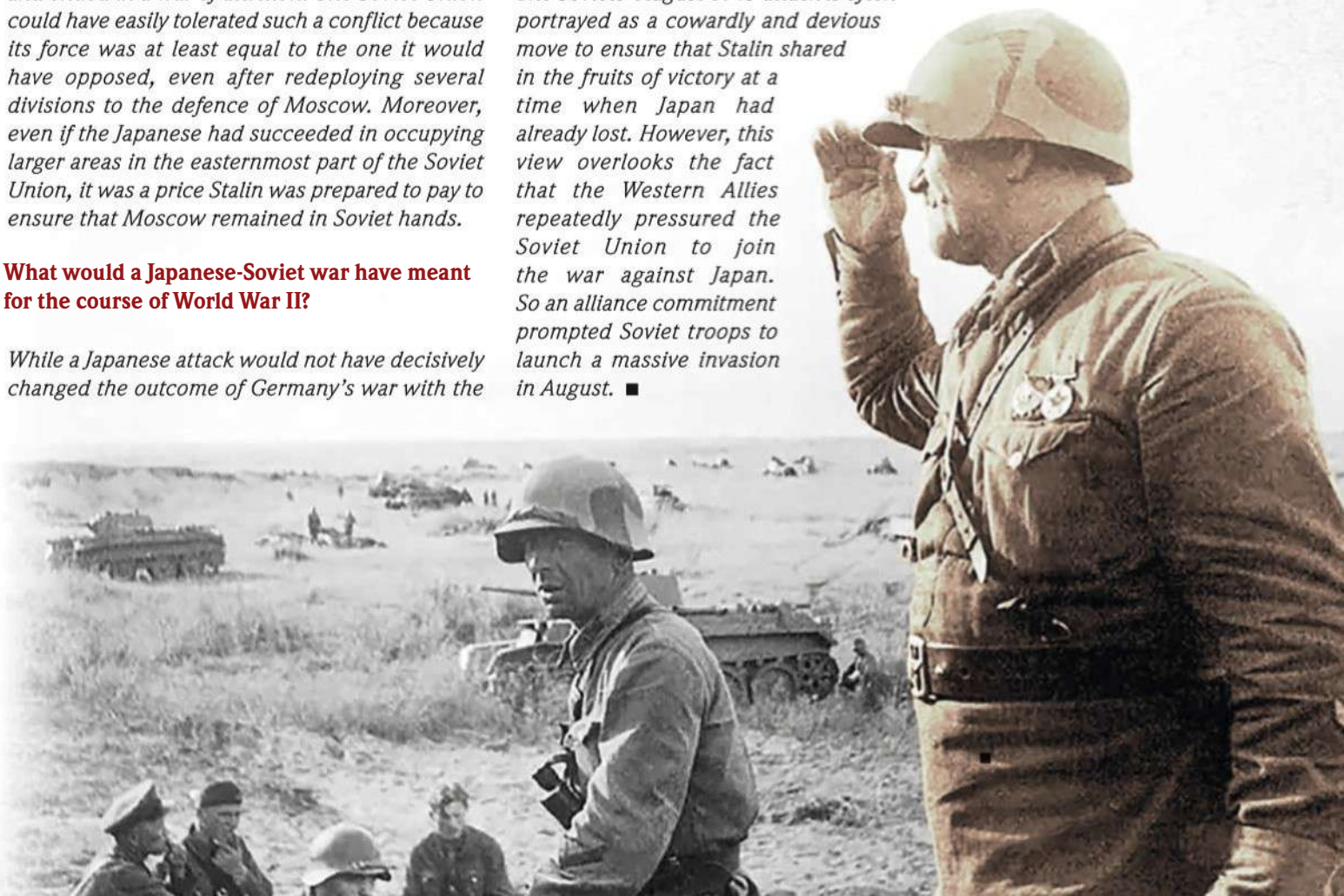
*A Japanese attack would have meant that Japan's military was stuck in the old China quagmire and a new Soviet quagmire. In that situation, it is highly unlikely that Japan would have continued to invade Southeast Asia in order to get its hands on the region's raw materials.*

*If that were the case, the Japanese would not have found it necessary to attack the US Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, and the US might not have been drawn into the world war as an active participant. By contrast, one can imagine that at some point in the mid-to-late-1940s, the Soviet army would have pushed back the Germans and conquered Europe all the way to the Atlantic. So from the middle of the 20th century, we would have had a bipolar world divided between the United States and the Soviet Union, just as we did in reality.*

**In the end, it was the Soviet Union that ended up declaring war on Japan. Why?**

*The Soviets' August 1945 attack is often portrayed as a cowardly and devious move to ensure that Stalin shared in the fruits of victory at a time when Japan had already lost. However, this view overlooks the fact that the Western Allies repeatedly pressured the Soviet Union to join the war against Japan. So an alliance commitment prompted Soviet troops to launch a massive invasion in August. ■*

**The Soviet Union's most skilled officers gained valuable experience fighting Japan in 1939. Georgy Zhukov particularly distinguished himself. He would later be put in charge of Moscow's defence.**







It had been raining heavily all evening and the ground was muddy – behind us, the tanks were moving into position.

German Captain Wackernagel on the eve of the Battle of Kursk.

# ALL HELL BROKE LOOSE



# Kursk front line, July 1943



*A final prayer. Despite Communism's ban on religion, the Red Army allowed soldiers to pray to God before the decisive battle.*



# All hell broke loose

**In the summer of 1943, almost 800,000 German soldiers, supported by 3,000 tanks, were ready to attack the Soviet positions at Kursk. The assault was prepared in secrecy – or so the Germans believed. But the Soviets knew all about the plans, and before long, the world's biggest armoured battle would begin.**

By Benjamin Christensen

**O**n 4th July, under heavy artillery fire, German Lieutenant Geiger and his unit from the 394th Panzergrenadier Regiment advanced towards Soviet outposts near the town of Gertsovka. The Germans were right on the front line at Kursk and had been tasked with driving the Soviets from their forward positions before the German Army began its long-awaited summer offensive the following day with a well-prepared pincer manoeuvre at the Kursk salient.

*"I scoured the terrain through my binoculars. I will never forget what happened next. I was suddenly hit by something powerful that sent me flying. I was still holding the binoculars in front of me but was now looking in a completely different direction. My first reaction was bewilderment as to how I was seeing a different section of terrain. But the next moment, I felt a sharp pain in my right hip, as if I had been pierced with a sword. When I touched the area, blood poured out. I had been hit by a large projectile that had passed right through my body."*

*"The enemy artillery fire started again. I shouted to the sergeant major that I was wounded and that he should take over the platoon. Then I rolled down into a crater to take cover from the enemy fire. Our company continued the attack, and no one seemed to notice that I was wounded,"* said Geiger, who did not yet know that his unit was engaged in a battle

that would become known as the world's greatest armoured assault: the Battle of Kursk.

Geiger had no time to think about the impending battle. Badly wounded, he tried to stay alive while his comrades put the Soviets on the defensive.

*"Suddenly I was all alone, and an eerie silence surrounded me. I heard the noise of battle in the distance. I felt my wound again and saw that my trousers and jacket were completely soaked with blood. I began to shake. Desperate thoughts hit me. I could barely move – who would find me here? I resigned myself to my fate. Then, from out of nowhere, a head poked up over the crater's edge and a hand reached down to pull me out. I could see that a motorcycle with a sidecar had stopped. I felt my unknown companion put me in the sidecar and speed away. Then I passed out."*

## Difficult odds awaited

Lieutenant Geiger was one of the first German soldiers to be wounded in the Battle of Kursk, which officially began the following day, 5th July 1943.

Months of preparation had gone into the operation and the German generals' plan was simple. The 9th Army of Army Group Centre would advance towards Kursk from the north, while the 4th Panzer Army of Army Group South would advance from the south. Their task was to break through the many layers of Soviet defences and reach the city of Kursk, thus driving a 200-kilometre-deep wedge behind the Soviet units on the front line, cutting them off from escape. The hope was to capture hundreds of thousands of Soviets and weaken the Red Army, just as the Germans had managed before in 1941 and 1942.

But this time the Soviets were ready and the Germans outnumbered. In the south, Army Group South, with its 450,000 men and 1,500 tanks, faced 626,000 Soviet soldiers and 1,700 tanks from the Red Army's Voronezh Front. The situation was even worse in the north, where Army Group Centre's 332,000 troops and 1,000 tanks faced the Soviet Central Front's 712,000 infantry and 1,800 tanks. The Soviet positions were also well equipped. The Red Army knew that its anti-tank guns had difficulty penetrating the armour on ►

**Soviet pilots attack German airfields on the day of the attack – a tactic the Germans had used during every previous offensive.**





# Heavy bombardment took Germans by surprise

Early in the morning of 5th July, the Red Army's guns began a devastating bombardment of German soldiers and tanks as they prepared to attack. The assault caught the Germans unawares.

**T**he Soviets had such accurate intelligence that, a few hours before the planned German offensive, they launched a huge bombardment of the German Army. Thousands of guns hammered away along the front line where the Germans were preparing units for the attack.

On the northern front alone, 3,000 guns, mortars and rocket launchers were fired. Over the next three hours, half the total ammunition used during the entire Battle of Kursk would be expended. Although the pre-emptive bombardment was alarming and inflicted

heavy losses on the Germans, the effect was not quite as hoped, as the commander of the Soviet forces, Marshal Zhukov, noted:

"Naturally, the artillery counter-preparation did inflict heavy losses on the enemy and disorganised the troop control in the course of the offensive but, all the same, we had expected that its impact would be greater. When observing the course of the fighting and questioning prisoners, I came to the conclusion that the Central and Voronezh Fronts had started the counter-preparation too early. The German soldiers were still asleep in the

trenches, dug-outs and ravines, and the tank units were still under cover in the waiting areas. It would have been better to have begun the counter-preparation approximately 30-40 minutes later."

Despite Zhukov's words, the bombardment was highly damaging. On the northern front alone, Soviet guns destroyed 50 German gun batteries, greatly weakening the initial German assault that was supposed to wipe out bunkers, gun emplacements and minefields. Thus a crucial part of the German combat power was taken out of play.

**Historians say the Soviets' pre-emptive strike on the day of the German offensive was the heaviest bombardment in history. The Red Army fired more shells in a few hours than the Germans used during the entire campaign against France.**





the front of German tanks, so the Soviets had placed guns in hidden positions around the terrain. As the Germans drove past, the Soviets would open fire on the Nazi tanks' thinly armoured sides.

### **Germans captured Soviet trenches**

The main attack on the Soviet lines at Kursk was scheduled for 02.00 on 5th July but the first German units, including Lieutenant Geiger's, began to move forward and attack Soviet outposts the previous afternoon. The infantry was tasked with clearing corridors and securing crossings for the German tanks that would attack the following day and break through the main Soviet lines. Another of the soldiers taking part in the early push was Captain Wackernagel, who described the situation after his unit had completed its mission and moved into position in captured Soviet trenches:


*"It had been raining heavily all evening and the ground was muddy – behind us, the tanks were moving into position. We were being shelled by heavy Soviet artillery. It was that evening that the Führer's orders for Operation Citadel reached us. Hitler's message to our soldiers was to give everything they had in the battle*

*that lay ahead. I still remember what was happening when we received the message. I was lying in a trench, dirty and soaked to the skin. Our own artillery was firing intensely and the enemy was replying in kind.*

*"I ordered a staff officer to read the message aloud. The whole situation was not without a certain degree of comedy. The officer shouted as loud as he could to drown out the roar of our artillery, while enemy shells burst around us as we huddled together for safety. I am not sure if the soldiers heard anything that was read out, or if they even listened."*

All along the front, German soldiers prepared for the next day's attack. Some calmed their nerves with a sip of schnapps or vodka. Others tried in vain to get some sleep, like Lieutenant Walter Schaefer-Kehnert:

*"Drenched by a thunderstorm and freezing cold, we huddled together in our foxholes, barely*



**The German soldiers were already tired when the fighting began. Throughout the night, Soviet shells had robbed them of sleep and thinned out the ranks.**



**You can be sure that we will give them a thrashing. No one can match our will and fanaticism.** ■ German Major Meinrad von Lauchert in a letter to his wife.

*able to sleep because of the constant night attacks by bombers. Countless flares hung overhead, and the flashes of exploding bombs lit up the night."*

With no hope of sleep, many soldiers instead tried to write a last letter home to their loved ones before the attack began.

*"We are now five hours away from the start of the great advance,"* Major Meinrad von Lauchert wrote home to his wife, Erika.

*"You can be sure we'll give them a thrashing. No one can match our will and fanaticism. We know what is expected of us. Don't worry – it will go well, as always. Morale is great!"*

German optimism, however, was about to fade. The Red Army managed to capture several German soldiers during the fledgling attacks on 4th July and forced vital information out of the prisoners, as Soviet correspondent Vasily Grossman noted in his diary:

*"A German sapper was captured during the night of 4th July. He revealed that the attack was beginning and that the order had gone out to clear mines."*

The information from all the prisoners was identical: the Germans planned to start their attack between 01.00 and 02.00. The message reached Nikita Khrushchev, political adviser of the Voronezh Front.

The future leader of the Soviet Union called Moscow to obtain Stalin's permission to begin countermeasures. On the other end of the phone, the Soviet dictator asked Khrushchev what he recommended, and the latter replied: *"The commander [General Nikolai Vatutin] and I have been exchanging opinions, and we're very optimistic."*

Surprised, Stalin asked, *"Why?"*

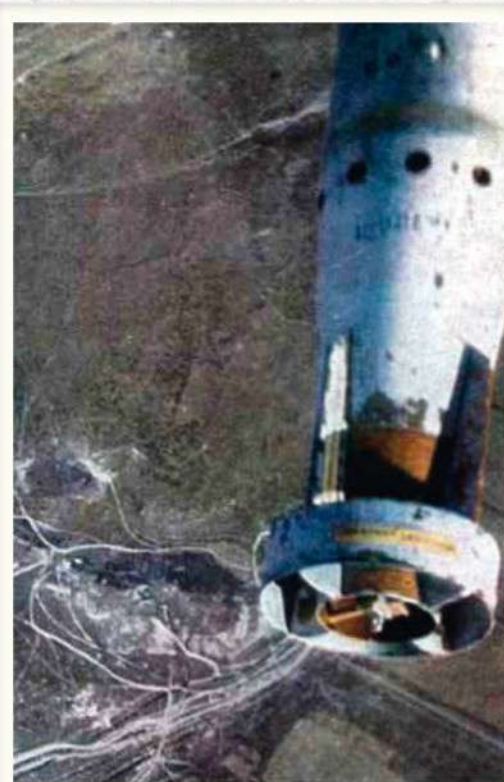
*"Because our defensive positions are solid, and we'll make the enemy pay in blood when he tries to break through,"* Khrushchev explained.

The Soviets were ready. They had been preparing for months, building deep defensive lines with trenches, gun emplacements and thousands of minefields. A difficult task awaited the Germans if they wanted to break through the Soviet positions.

To pre-empt the Germans, Soviet Colonel General Rokossovsky ordered 500 guns, 460 mortars and 160 rocket launchers to begin bombarding the German forward positions at 01.20, just before the Nazis' own initial bombardment. The German forces were surprised to find themselves on the defensive, just hours before they were due to attack themselves. The 20th Panzer Division was one of the units being shelled. In its daily report, the commander noted:

*"01.15: The start of a heavy enemy barrage from all types of heavy weapons. The Russians were anticipating an offensive from our side at 02.00. This is confirmed by the statements of two deserters in the 6th Infantry Division's sector."*

After the war, Soviet historians were quick to claim that the bombardment did a great deal of damage,



**The Luftwaffe soon regained the initiative. Train lines, headquarters and gun positions were bombed on the first day of the battle.**

while the German units that suffered it reported only modest losses. The truth lay somewhere in between, because the thousands upon thousands of shells wore down the Germans before the battle even began.

### **Luftwaffe went on the attack**

The bombardment of the German positions also came as a surprise to the Luftwaffe. One pilot, Lieutenant Colonel Walter Lehweß-Litzmann, recalled:

*"In the morning of 5th July, the troops assembling for battle were in for an unpleasant surprise: the Soviet forces initiated the attack with an unexpected time-on-target strike on the troops that were just forming for the attack. They called me excitedly – I had just gathered the commanders for a last briefing in my headquarters – and changed the orders. We had to take off at once in order to suppress Soviet artillery, even though it was still dark."*

To support the German infantry and armoured columns, the Luftwaffe was ordered to keep the Soviet positions under constant pressure. In his diary, Stuka pilot Lieutenant Erhard Jähnert described the main tasks and tactics of the German dive-bombers on the first day of the Battle of Kursk:

*"To neutralise the artillery fire of the Soviets, we were sent in waves against their positions. When we arrived at the assigned area, we relieved another formation. We then circled over the artillery position for up to 20 minutes, while▶*





*each aircraft plunged to attack, one by one. Thus maximum pressure was put on the Soviet gunners, who were constantly under air attack."*

But the Luftwaffe did not dominate the air this time. The Soviet air force had started to receive new supplies of Il-2 fighter-bombers, which were almost the equal of the German planes. However, Soviet pilots were still being trained too quickly and most had no experience with the aircraft. For many of them, 5th July was their first combat mission. Hungarian pilot Miklós Keyneres, fighting on the German side, described the dogfights between German Messerschmitt Bf 109 fighters and the new Soviet Il-2s:

*"We spot four Russian fighter-bombers peacefully approaching in close formation, despite the deadly anti-aircraft fire. We fly over burning wreckage. I dive towards the Russian formation, ignoring the anti-aircraft fire. Then I see that I have made a miscalculation. Behind the four Russian planes, four more come flying. I dive between the two formations and fortune smiles on me again,"* Keyneres explained, then continued:

*"The machine on the left side peels off from the rest, with me in hot pursuit. The hunt begins. The Russian pushes close to the ground and escapes, hopping over trees. But we remain clung to his tail. On my right-hand side, three Germans are pursuing too. One of the Germans dives on it, but fails to bring it down. Now my turn has come. I pull up slightly and, from the far side, I aim ahead of the engine but hold my fire for another moment. The distance is still too great. Then I squeeze both firing buttons ... I shoot at the cockpit. By now the Russian gunner does not return fire. From a close distance, I open up with the cannon. The machine shudders and hits the ground with its right wing tip. It slides along a creek, violently burning."*

With the Luftwaffe's help, the Soviet gunfire died out after a few hours, and then it was the Germans' turn. The Wehrmacht's summer offensive was about to begin. The Red Army was to be put on the back foot and the panzer divisions rolled confidently across the steppes. At 05.00, German guns began a heavy bombardment of the Red Army's defensive lines, and the Luftwaffe simultaneously concentrated its attacks on command posts, routes and strategically important military positions.

An unnamed Soviet officer at the headquarters of the Voronezh Front, covering the southern half of

**The Soviet lines of defence worked as planned, and the Germans soon discovered that their attacks were costing them dearly.**



**We experienced a wave of gunfire, constant bombardment, constant shooting, constant explosions.** ■ Soviet tank commander Pavel Eremin on the Germans' initial attack.

the Kursk battlefield, experienced the initial bombardment at close quarters:

*"The working over of our defences from the air, in combination with artillery fire, was supposed to secure a breakthrough for their German tanks by means of the suppression of our fire systems, the destruction of a significant portion of our troop strength, and the demolition of the fortifications and weapons of our defences at the intended breakthrough sector. Just for this reason, the Germans conducted a systematic, uninterrupted aerial bombardment of the ground in and around the breakthrough sectors by large numbers of aeroplanes, with the use of large incendiary bombs, small fragmentation bombs and small cluster bombs.*

*"However, the extensive system of trenches and shelters in our defence prevented the enemy from realising his optimistic expectations regarding the effect [of the bombarding]; our losses in men from the [enemy] aviation were insignificant."*

Although the casualty numbers may have been negligible, the air raids and bombardments were far from pleasant for those soldiers in the line of fire. Pavel Eremin of the Soviet 6th Tank Corps recalled:

*"We experienced wave after wave of continuous gunfire, bombardment, shooting, and explosions. The sound was so intense it deafened you. It was extremely difficult to tell what was happening. We were all afraid of dying. We had to overcome that fear."*

### **Rookies manned the trenches**

The bombardment was a heavy blow to the Soviet soldiers on the front line, many of whom were experiencing their first combat. One of them was Private Nikolai Ivanovich Slavin of the 196th Guards Rifle Regiment, who found himself in some of the toughest fighting on the southern front.

*"The fighting on 5th July was my first battle. For about an hour and a half, we were under constant fire from enemy guns and mortars, followed by aerial bombardment. I lay at the bottom of the trench and – as they say – waited for death. The noise was ear-splitting, so I couldn't think clearly.*

*"After the bombardment, the company commander ordered us to fire at the enemy infantry and showed us which direction to shoot in. There was a big cloud of dust and tanks and armoured vehicles coming towards us. Our guns were firing at them. 'Why are you just standing there?' the officer asked me. 'The tanks are a long way off,' I replied. I didn't have a clear target. The commander swore at me and told me to shoot anyway. I started shooting, like my comrades."*

From his position, Slavin had to watch his shots miss while the German tanks continued their

approach: *"When the tanks were within 400 metres of us and started firing, a soldier next to me dropped dead. A shell had torn off half his head. Someone sent for the doctor. I was in shock. I could already clearly see the German infantry. Our guns started firing, but the Germans continued, walking behind their tanks, using them as cover. I kept shooting at them non-stop. A shell hit our trench and covered us with earth. I could see our whole platoon firing carbines."*

From both sides, artillery and mortar shells hammered down on the soldiers, throwing clouds of earth and human remains into the air. German bombers also began to attack Slavin's trench again.

*"It felt like every plane was flying straight at me,"* remembered Slavin, who pressed himself against the bottom of the trench for cover.

*"When I got back up and looked around, I realised that German tanks had broken through our trench. A tank was in flames."*

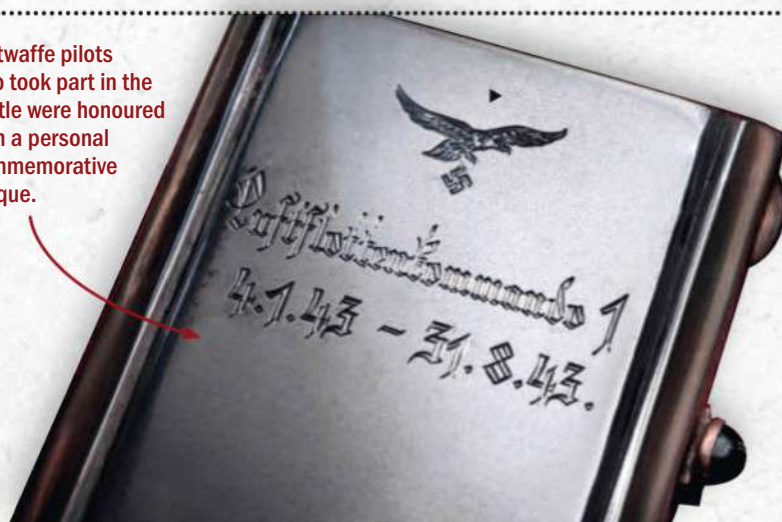
Not far from Private Slavin, German units fought their way through the town of Cherkasskoye. One of the soldiers was Captain Wackernagel, whose infantry unit had to navigate through the mayhem. The regiment's commander had been killed at the beginning of the attack, and Wackernagel had taken over his post amid the chaotic combat:

*"I remember the hopeless chaos of the fighting inside the town. Companies and units were mixed up. Combat was close range, and shots were often fired only because those either side of you were firing. There's a huge danger of shooting your own men that way,"* recalled the captain.

Wackernagel somehow had to get his units under control in this chaos and order them to continue the attack on the Soviet positions.

*"I remember how a young lieutenant, who had been put in command of a whole company and had been through a bombardment that killed ▶*

Luftwaffe pilots who took part in the battle were honoured with a personal commemorative plaque.





**The German tank commanders were still better than their opponents. When fighting raged on the steppes, the Germans destroyed six Soviet tanks for every one they lost.**







*several soldiers right next to him, stood there, completely out of it, his eyes glazed over, unable to do anything. But he had to lead one of my companies. So I shouted at him to get him going and finally, with gun drawn, had to force him to resume the attack with his company."*

The casualty figures also began to rise for Private Slavin and his unit, still in close combat with German panzer troops.

*"Our platoon leader came by several times yelling, 'Shoot! Shoot! Shoot!' About five or six German tanks approached. Our guns were firing at them, but they continued towards us. I saw a lot of dead soldiers. The orderlies dragged them away. I wanted to hide somewhere from this awful shooting," he remembered.*

*"The commander came over and asked us to prepare grenades. Suddenly one of the German tanks broke through our trench, just five metres from me. The commander threw his anti-tank grenade and I heard the explosion. Two German soldiers in black uniforms got out of the tank and were immediately shot down by our rifles."*

While the Germans – despite resistance – were advancing in the south, the attack in the north had also begun. There, General Model's 9th Army faced a major challenge. While the landscape in the south was shaped by wide open spaces over which tanks could easily attack, the front in the north was broken up by impenetrable forests. Only a stretch of about 90 kilometres was suitable for an armoured assault. The landscape meant that the Soviets had been able to concentrate their defensive positions in a narrow area and prepare extensive minefields and tank traps.

Fortunately for the Germans, a Soviet prisoner of war had provided information about a weak point in the Soviet line, against which they immediately sent their armoured forces.

*"A wall of tanks came towards us. About five or six hundred. An awful lot of tanks," recalled a Soviet soldier on the northern front.*

*"And then all hell broke loose."*

The defenders were outnumbered and had to fight fiercely to hold out until reinforcements could arrive and stop the German advance, which was growing in strength.

*"The earth and the sky burned. Tanks lay on top of tanks. Soldiers on top of soldiers. It was like Judgment Day. But we kept our word to Stalin: not to give in, not one step back," described another Soviet soldier.*

Because they had been preparing for months, the Soviets were able to send reinforcements quickly to fill the gaps in the lines and respond aggressively.

Swarms of armoured troops were sent against the German spearhead. A small group of the new German Tiger tanks suddenly faced more than 90 Soviet ►►

## FACTS

### **Cherkasskoye,**

**which Captain Wackernagel battled through,** was one of hundreds of small settlements in the countryside near Kursk.

The 'towns' often consisted of just a few well-fortified houses.





# Stalin's four aces led the fighting



### MARSHAL GEORGY ZHUKOV

Zhukov was the coordinator of the Soviet high command, Stavka, during the Battle of Kursk. It was his idea to reinforce the exposed front and build a strong defensive line against which the German panzer forces would wear themselves down. The experienced marshal, considered by many to be one of the greatest military geniuses of the 20th century, was convinced the Soviets could ruin Germany's chances of launching an offensive in the East again if they defeated the Germans at Kursk.



### GENERAL KONSTANTIN ROKOSSOVSKY

As head of the Soviet Central Front, Rokossovsky was tasked with stopping German attacks in the north. The general had distinguished himself in battle over the past few years and was one of the Soviet Union's best commanders – especially of armoured troops. Rokossovsky was one of the few Red Army generals to have survived years in one of the NKVD secret police prisons during the purge of the Soviet officer corps in the 1930s. By the start of the war, he was back in Stalin's favour.



### GENERAL NIKOLAI VATUTIN

The Voronezh Front was led by the highly capable General Nikolai Vatutin, one of Stalin's favourites. The young general had worked his way up from his childhood in a peasant family and was therefore not only a skilled military leader, but also a perfect example of the new social order in the Communist Soviet Union.



### GENERAL IVAN KONEV

In the area behind Kursk, Stavka had assembled the largest army of reserves ever gathered before any campaign: the Steppe Front. To lead the reserves, which would be deployed when the German attack stalled and the time was ripe for a major counter-attack, Zhukov chose Ivan Konev. The general had shown great ability in the early years of the war and would end up commanding all Soviet land forces after the war.





## Nazi generals were full of doubt



### GENERAL OBERST HERMANN HOTH

Hoth led the German 4th Panzer Army, which was to attack the Soviet southern front during the offensive. Hoth was a skilled general – in fact, the most experienced panzer leader in the German army – but by the summer of 1943 he was burning out. Moreover, Hoth doubted the success of the attack on Kursk and hesitated at crucial junctures.



### FIELD MARSHAL GÜNTHER VON KLUGE

As commander of the German Army Group Central, von Kluge was in charge of the northern part of the German attack on Kursk. But von Kluge left the main responsibility for his front's attack to Major General Walter Model, whose 9th Army spearheaded the northern assault. Von Kluge was one of many German generals who were sceptical about the attack plans against Kursk.

### MAJOR GENERAL WALTER MODEL

As commander of the 9th Army, Model had the main responsibility for carrying out the German attack in the north. He was one of Hitler's favourites, but preferred defensive battles. Model long argued that instead of going on the offensive, the Germans should force the Soviets to attack. But to no avail.

### GENERAL FIELD MARSHAL ERICH VON MANSTEIN

Manstein was commander of the German Army Group South and therefore in charge of the entire southern wing in the attack on Kursk. He was a skilled military strategist and was behind the strategy that had secured victory over France in 1940. Manstein was also the man behind major German victories on the Eastern Front, including in the Crimea in 1941-42 and again in the spring of 1943, when he led an attack that captured the important city of Kharkov.





## The earth and the sky burned. Tanks lay on top of tanks. Soldiers on top of soldiers. ■ An unknown Soviet soldier described the fighting on 5th July.

T-34 tanks, and the battle became a bloodbath. Over 40 Soviet T-34s were shot to pieces, while the Germans lost seven or eight Tigers. Despite the losses, the Soviets managed to slow the attack in the north and the Germans, suffering heavy losses, only advanced eight to ten kilometres on the first day.

### Germans faced stiff resistance

The German troops that attacked in the south also faced tougher resistance than expected. Lieutenant Rodde, Adjutant of the 3rd Panzer Division, noted:

*"Despite our artillery and Stuka attacks, the enemy was far from defeated. The Soviet soldiers*

*fought with great ferocity and didn't give an inch. As a comrade from the panzergrenadier regiment reported, every Soviet had to be dragged out from his foxhole by his ears."*

More surprises awaited Rodde and his unit as, for the first time, the Germans encountered the results of the Soviets' months of preparation and the massive defensive lines that farmers, labourers and soldiers had created together. All along the front, the Germans came up against metre-deep anti-tank trenches, minefields and low fortified positions, perfect for firing at advancing tanks.

*"We crossed the Berezovsky River north of the anti-tank ditch. I had never seen one like it before, although we had seen a number of remarkable things in battle when it came to Russian ingenuity in the design of defences. This anti-tank trench was new to us."*

Another unpleasant surprise came in the form of hidden Soviet T-34 tanks:

*"This was another measure hitherto unknown. These dug-in tanks were very dangerous. They were camouflaged extremely well – as usual with the Russians – and could only be reconnoitred once they opened fire. They usually fired at short range so as to have a maximum chance of hitting something."*

*"The next thing that surprised us was the abundance of minefields. The mines reduced our mobility and speed. Our engineers worked constantly to clear paths for the tanks. As usual, there were not enough men, so the tank crew had to help. Artillery and mortar fire were the next weapons used by the Russians. Our units were immediately fired upon when they were stopped by a minefield or an obstacle."*

Soviet Lieutenant-General NK Popel described his countrymen's defence of a line near Berezov on the morning of 5th July, where Soviet anti-tank guns stood ready to engage the German assault columns:

*"There is no need for binoculars. The German tanks are plainly visible without them. They are rolling forward in a wide ribbon, broken here and there by gaps. Their spearhead is striving to gobble up more and more ground. The left flank of the column crushed a dense grove of nut trees, and the leading vehicles ... came to a stop in open ground. Black shell bursts coil tight plaits of smoke around them. The barrels of the anti-tank guns were lying horizontally, just above ground level. The spurts of flame from their barrels barely avoid the bent ears of wheat."*

Soon after, Popel's unit came under heavy fire from the Germans, who managed to hit the enemy despite its camouflage and defences.

*"The regiment fires for less than an hour, and one-third of the guns have already been put out of ▶*

**The radio commander had ultimate responsibility in the tank. He had to ensure that the rest of the crew carried out orders quickly and accurately.**







## TANK RADIO

# Radio made the difference

German tank drivers were outnumbered and their machines often broke down but they had an invaluable advantage. All the tanks were in radio contact with each other, allowing the Germans to quickly change tactics during battle.

**A**lthough the German tanks were outnumbered at the Battle of Kursk, the tank commanders had a decisive advantage over their Soviet opponents. Every German tank was equipped with a modern radio, so the men could communicate with each other about the enemy's positions. In the midst of a large and confusing battle, where the crew had

very limited visibility through the tank periscope, the radio was a huge advantage for the Germans.

By the summer of 1943, the Soviets had begun to install radios in their own tanks – but only the lead vehicles, driven by platoon leaders, company commanders and upwards, had radios. The units therefore had to follow

their leaders' movements more or less slavishly or communicate by gestures and flags – not easy in the middle of a battle. And if a platoon's lead tank, the only one equipped with a radio, was knocked out during the fighting, the unit was suddenly unable to communicate with the rest of the company, battalion or regiment.

## 1: INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

The radio could be set to communicate internally between tank crews. Amid the engine noise and the sound of explosions, the radio was a gift and the best way to make oneself understood. Soviet tank commanders, by comparison, had to communicate with the driver by tapping him on the shoulders with their feet.

## 2: TO THE REST OF THE UNIT

Another option sent messages from the commander out to the other tanks in his unit. This enabled him to give them orders or warn them of enemies. The Soviets had to communicate with other tanks using flags or hand signals.

## 3: TO HIGH COMMAND

The radio could also be used to communicate directly with the staff of, for example, the company, battalion or regiment. In this way, the Germans could quickly report back and receive new orders. The Soviets had to establish orders before the battle and then follow them without changes or coordination.





action. The gun crew members are dwindling in number. The losses are not so much from the tanks as from enemy air attack.

*"German dive-bombers rule the skies. Now and then, they form into a closed ring formation, or shake out into a file. Then once again they are whirling in a round dance, releasing their bombs one after the other. And below them, columns of earth and flames are rising, and pieces of gun carriages and logs are sent flying. Just a bit ago, Major Kotenko, the commander of an artillery regiment, tried to slip through to the gun emplacements in his jeep. The smouldering frame of his vehicle is now in the field. It is unknown how the surviving major still managed to reach the guns and is now serving a gun as part of the crew."*

The artillery observers had by now left their posts to help operate the

guns. The Soviets needed every last man in the close combat that ensued.

*"Many battery and platoon commanders are also manning guns in place of gun layers and loaders who have been knocked out of action," Popel recalled.*

*"Smoke, dust, cinders... A torrent of anti-tank fire and metal is directed against a torrent of fire and metal, discharged by German tanks and German artillery. A roaring blaze and whistling shell fragments are inundating everyone around like a boundless sea. The bitterness of the fighting is unparalleled. After several hours, nothing remained of two of our destroyer anti-tank artillery regiments but, as they say, their unit number."*

After the battle's first day of fighting, Popel's two regiments had a total of only 12 guns

**Exhaustion is written on the faces of the German soldiers, who managed to advance only a few kilometres on the first day of the battle.**





remaining out of the 44 with which they had started the day.

### Soviet units dared not retreat

The official report of the Soviet 51st Guards Field Division, defending the area near Berezov on the southern front, recorded the losses soberly and precisely:

*"The 9th Rifle Company did not abandon its positions, and in the initial stubborn fighting, the entire company was wiped out together with its equipment; remnants of the 7th and 8th Companies – 41 men – fell back under the enemy's onslaught to the main defensive line."*

The situation was the same all along the front, with Soviet units fighting doggedly to the end rather than retreat. In many cases, it was because the soldiers were spurred on by a belief in their own abilities and ►



NEWS FROM THE FRONT:



# The New York Times

Tuesday 6th July 1943

## Soviet lines hold

**Nazis strike in the Orel, Kursk, Belgorod areas – make slight gain. 3,000 of foe killed. 586 tanks, 203 planes lost by attackers as 101-day lull ends.**

Germany opened a heavy offensive yesterday on a 160-mile front in the Orel, Kursk and Belgorod sector and lost 586 tanks, 203 planes and thousands of men in the first few hours of savage fighting, Russia announced today.

More than 3,000 Germans were killed in a single sector around Belgorod and many tanks were destroyed during the morning, the Russian midnight communiqué reported.

The 586 tanks the Russians claimed to have knocked out are the equivalent of two complete panzer divisions and exceed any previous performance by Russian anti-tank batteries in 24 hours, according to Reuter.

The German attack came after 101 days of a lull since the end of the blazing winter campaign.

Massed German tanks and infantry, driving under an umbrella of planes, hit the Red Army lines in the direction of Orel, Kursk and Belgorod, key points on the line between Kharkov and Moscow, according to the midnight bulletin and a special communiqué recorded from the Moscow radio.

### Usual blitzkrieg tactics

Russia's special communiqué indicated that the enemy offensive had come suddenly, in once-familiar German lightning fashion, without extensive artillery preparation, and the German High Command had depended on sheer impact for success in the first phase.

They met an alert and powerful Russian Army, which repulsed all main attacks, and the Germans were able to penetrate the lines at only a few places and to a slight degree, it was asserted.

**The day after the first attack, the German offensive was front-page news around the world.**







**Tanks and soldiers on the move on 6th July 1943 – after a day of fierce fighting, the Germans made a small breakthrough on the southern front. Now tanks, artillery and soldiers roll through the gap in the line.**

their love for their country, but just as often it was out of fear of the reprisals that awaited if they retreated. Captain Tikhon Chernov of the 67th Guards Field Division preferred to fight than flee:

*"I was in the trench with a few soldiers firing guns. We set fire to two German tanks. I was wounded in my right side and lost a lot of blood. One of the soldiers bandaged the wound, but blood kept seeping out. Neither I nor the men left our position. I was getting weaker and weaker. When the German infantry came close, I couldn't even fire a rifle. That's how I got caught."*

Together with hundreds of other captured Soviet soldiers, Chernov was taken behind the German lines, but the same day he managed to escape and return to the Soviets, where he was immediately interrogated by Colonel Pashkov.

*"I was hoping that Pashkov would send me back to my battalion, which was engaged in combat. He said he didn't believe me. That I couldn't have escaped from German captivity when I was wounded. I was sent to the hospital, and when I got out, I was told to meet with the political officers of the Voronezh Front."*

*"They threw me out of the Communist Party on the spot and sent my papers to a tribunal 'for not resisting and being taken prisoner'. The tribunal sentenced me to ten years in a labour camp when the war was over, I was relieved of my captaincy and transferred to a penal unit."*

Chernov survived the war and ten years of toil in Siberia, but fear of meeting a similar fate was great among the Soviets, who thus fought fiercely to the end.

On the first day of the Battle of Kursk, Soviet defences and the soldiers' patriotism were ultimately not enough. After 17 hours of fighting, the German II SS Panzer Corps finally broke through the first Soviet defensive line on the southern front. In response,

Soviet General Vatutin sent his 1st Tank Army in for a counter-attack. German Lieutenant Schöne, leading a tank company near the town of Cherkasskoye, encountered the Soviet assault:

*"As we drove north-east of Cherkasskoye, we met the first heavy exchange of shots. I saw the commander's cupola on the tank next to me get shot off, and the commander's head went with it."*

Soon Cherkasskoye was the centre of a fierce tank battle with heavy casualties on both sides.

*"The German tanks began to retreat,"* recalled Lieutenant Ivan Tarasovich Tarasyuk, who was in a Soviet tank.

*"Our regiment was ordered to make a counter-attack. Our tanks fought bravely and relentlessly. They destroyed 35 enemy tanks, but the regiment lost almost everything."*

Ivan Tarasyuk had encountered the new German Panther and Tiger tanks, a nasty surprise for the Soviet tank commanders. A Red Army officer remembered his despair:

*"It's hard to fight them. You shoot at them, but the shells bounce off. What's the result? Heavy losses! About 60 percent of the brigade."*

But the new tanks also caused problems and confusion among the Germans themselves, who





weren't yet accustomed to the new machines, as tank commander Lieutenant Schöne reported:

*"Two Panther tanks from the Großdeutschland Division came driving out of the heavy rain towards us. Because our gunners and commanders did not recognise the silhouettes of the new tank type, one of the tanks immediately opened fire and destroyed both Panthers."*

But what really stopped the German tanks on the first day of battle were the thousands upon thousands of Soviet anti-tank mines strewn across the landscape. As Soviet political commissar Mikhail Bronnikov noted:

*"After the German tanks broke through the trench line, they hit mines and were destroyed by our artillery."*

The Soviets slowed down the advance for several hours, but during the day the Germans managed to

penetrate the first of the Soviet defence lines, both in the north and in the south. In a few places, the German Army even penetrated the second line of defence, but it took much longer to fight its way through the Soviet minefields, while Soviet artillery rained down on the attack columns.

Over 70 percent of the German tank losses on the first day were due to Soviet mines, and half of the new Elefant heavy tank destroyers were also lost. Most because their caterpillar tracks were blown to pieces in the minefields.

In the south, SS panzer forces had cut a 16-by-21-kilometre hole in the Soviet lines, through which German tanks and soldiers were now pouring. Despite the difficult odds, it seemed Germany's plan was succeeding. The road to Kursk lay open unless the Soviets could do something in the coming days to halt the German advance. ■

**The Luftwaffe lost 850 aircraft in the fighting – nearly a third of its total air fleet on the Eastern Front.**







# CLOSING THE POCKET

I took part in the Battle of Stalingrad, but I have never seen a battle as bad as this one.

Soviet soldier Yevlampii Kuzmich Gradv of the 268th Guards Rifle Regiment.



# Front line at Kursk, 6th-11th July



*On the southern front, the Red Army's defensive lines collapsed a few days after the start of the offensive, and the Germans eyed the possibility of success.*



# Closing the pocket

**The fighting at Kursk surged back and forth for five days. From the north and south, German tanks and soldiers pounded Soviet positions to slowly break through each defensive wall. It was a huge effort that was intent on bringing the two German forces together in a pincer movement to close the pocket at Kursk.**

By Benjamin Christensen

**G**erman artillery lieutenant Walter Schaefer-Kehnert grabbed his pencil to finally write a letter home to his loved ones. It wasn't the first time he'd tried to put his thoughts about the fierce fighting of previous days on paper.

*"Every time I start to write, something happens and I'm forced to stop. As I was about to begin this letter, the Russians attacked again with their tanks. I managed to destroy a huge American 'General Lee' [a US-made M3 Lee tank in Soviet service]. To our great joy, it exploded into fragments in a*

*huge fireball. Our tanks destroyed two more of them later, so our spirits are naturally quite high."*

For several days Schaefer-Kehnert and his unit had painstakingly battled their way through kilometre after kilometre of Soviet defences and minefields in an endless series of attacks and counter-attacks. Soldiers and tanks had hurled themselves at each other in a daily ritual of slaughter, but the German lieutenant's unit was finally closing on the city of Kursk. The young soldier took this moment to write home before the next wave of brutal fighting that was needed if the Germans were to





achieve their objective of closing a pincer around Soviet units caught in the Kursk pocket.

Schaefer-Kehnert was part of the southern front and his units were at least on the move, unlike their comrades on the northern front under Colonel General Walter Model's command. Here, resistance had proved extremely fierce from the very start of the German offensive. The Red Army had deployed the bulk of its armoured forces in the northern sector to slow down Model's attack, which they expected to be the strongest. The Germans had originally planned to break through and attack south along the railway line running from Orel to Kursk, but in the first days of the battle they'd run headlong into a wall of well-prepared Soviet positions and the advance had stalled.

Model turned the 9th Army's focus further west to the village of Olkhovatka in the hope of finding a weak point in the Soviet line, but here too, resistance repelled his army. Soviet reinforcements poured into the northern front, and the German advance quickly stalled less than 20 kilometres into the Kursk pocket, 65 kilometres from where they were expected to meet up with the soldiers from the southern front. Unable to advance any further, Model set about

reinforcing his position to defend against Soviet counter-attacks. If the mission to encircle the Soviet forces in the Kursk pocket was to succeed, it was now up to the forces of the southern front to either advance all the way to meet the entrenched northern front or force the Red Army to transfer reinforcements from north to south to give Model's 9th Army a chance to resume its advance.

### **General Hoth tricked the Red Army**

In the south, German forces advanced more easily. One key reason was that the steppe terrain was more open and suitable for tank warfare compared to the forests in the north. On the first day of the battle – 5th July – the Germans had pierced the front of two Soviet defensive lines and in some places had even penetrated the second defensive line. General Hoth's 4th Panzer Army also had another advantage: the experienced panzer commander chose to shift the focus of his attack further west than initially planned without informing German High Command. The decision turned out to be both fortuitous and correct. Soviet spies had infiltrated the High Command, so any plans that passed through it risked being leaked to the enemy.

On 6th July, fighting continued in the south as German units slowly battled their way towards the second Soviet line of defence. The soldiers faced fierce opposition.

*"I took part in the Battle of Stalingrad, but I have never seen a battle as bad as this one,"* recalled Yevlampii Kuzmich Gradov, an assistant on the staff of the 268th Soviet Guards Field Division. *"The German tanks came straight at us. Our tanks and artillery fought – as they say – 'to the last drop of blood'. Both sides suffered heavy losses."*

The staff officer experienced the fighting around the village of Zavidovka on 6th July. According to Gradov's own account, his division inflicted heavy losses on the Germans:

*"The German tanks that came closer to our lines came under fire from our anti-tank guns. About 25 tanks were blown up in the minefields just in front of our defensive lines. We stopped four or five tank attacks that day. I think the Germans lost about 60 tanks, including 15 Tiger and Panther tanks."*

Gradov's claims were exaggerated, but not deliberately so. In the minds of Soviet soldiers like Gradov, all German tanks resembled the mighty Tigers and Panthers. But the truth is that the Tiger tanks in the battle at Kursk were far and few and far between. The unit Gradov faced didn't possess a single Tiger or Panther tank, and the actual losses were far less than Gradov's claim – just seven tanks, five of which were both salvageable and repairable.

At 10.00 on 6th July, a force of Panther tanks from SS Division Grossdeutschland assembled to prepare ►

**The Russian countryside was dotted with small peasant villages – often just a few houses with barns. The small settlements were perfect for fortifying defensive positions.**





for an attack through the Soviet lines. The advance was tactically important for the Germans who needed to exploit the breakthroughs secured the day before with heavy losses. But shortly before the attack, the unit came under heavy fire from Soviet artillery. Two of the new Panther tanks were disabled and First Lieutenant Erdmann Gabriel, commanding one of the stricken companies, sped to the battalion commander to ask permission to lead all the tanks forward before they suffered further losses.

*"As I looked into the turret from above I saw the battalion commander, shaking in distress and incapable of taking any action. It was Major Teepe from the Armour Training School in Putlos, whom I knew in the rank of captain from my time at that institution. This, then, was the replacement we received last night for Sievers [the actual battalion commander, who had fallen ill]. It was obvious that this kind of baptism of fire during his first day of action at the front was too much for him."*

Despite Teepe's paralysis, Gabriel quickly gained permission to attack: *"I gave orders to the rest of the*

*battalion via radio: 'Follow my tank in direction of attack, move forward immediately!' Now, Russian infantry raised themselves by the droves at over 1,000 yards distance and retreated swiftly."*

Before long, Soviet anti-tank guns began opening fire on Gabriel and his battalion of Panther tanks. Gabriel's tank *"was severely hit by an anti-tank round that penetrated the munitions chamber at the left side, causing it to explode immediately"*.

Erdmann Gabriel was knocked unconscious by a blast of compressed air from the explosion, and when he came to, he needed to act fast to get out of the now-burning Panther tank.

*"Only glowing shreds of my dress, such as suspenders, collar, ties, and the Knight's Cross, remained on my chest. I tore off the smouldering headset and microphone with my severely burnt hands, which already had the fingernails popped off. By then the gunner was pushing out from below, but I had to push his head so as to get out of the turret myself. This all happened very fast. I extinguished the glowing remains by rolling in the*

**On the northern front, the Germans had already been forced to give up by 6th July. Here, soldiers were ordered to dig defensive positions and prepare for a Soviet counter-attack.**





**I gave orders to the rest of the battalion via radio: "Follow my tank in direction of attack."** ■ German tank commander Erdmann Gabriel.

*weeds on the field. I even managed to get the wedding ring off my finger before my hands started to swell."*

Despite Gabriel's fate, his unit and other German armoured forces managed to advance and by evening had reached the Soviet positions they were to attack the next morning. The Battle of Kursk was a marathon, with the Germans having to fight their way through Soviet lines every day simply to unlock a new set of objectives.

### Success came at a price

At times during the day, the German advance was rapid, such as when a breakthrough occurred and the Soviet units were overrun and forced to flee. As always, the panzer forces surged forward to quickly exploit the gaps in Soviet lines, but as the German armoured forces moved further and further behind the front, confusion spread. One example was in SS Division Grossdeutschland, where Captain Bergemann sat in on a staff meeting on the evening of 6th July, planning the following day's attack.

*"It was my job to write a summary of the meeting between the divisional commander and the regimental commanders in the form of a 'plan of attack' for the next day and then send out the same attack message to all the Battalion Commanders. When I had done this, I went to sleep in my Kübelwagen. During the night, an orderly delivered a written order from Division Staff concerning the attack the next morning. Being incredibly tired and above all thinking that the order was as it should be, I placed it beside me and went back to sleep.*

*"It was already light when I woke up and took a look at the division order that had come in. I froze in shock as the order was completely different to what the divisional commander and my regimental commander had discussed. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, for I could be court-martialled for falling asleep over a written divisional order."*

Bergemann had slept through a counter-order and sent his tank battalions in the wrong direction before the attack had even started.

Luckily for him, a new report soon arrived from one of the division's battalions, who'd observed in the morning light that the German forces had not advanced as far as they'd thought.

*"This rendered the division order redundant,"* Bergemann recalled. With a few corrections, the captain could issue an updated order to all units.

*"The episode only revealed that the senior commanders from division level upwards were often unaware of the actual positions of the forward units. Orders were therefore often out of date compared to the realities at the front. But as all our officers were trained to take the initiative,*



**Soviet lines of defence worked as intended. In the hilly terrain, the Germans had difficulty spotting the enemy before it was too late.**

*there was no disadvantage in this. Our officers made decisions rather than waiting for orders."*

During the first two days of the operation, the Germans had broken through the first Soviet defensive line around Kursk and advanced to the next line of defence. In places, small SS panzer units had even pierced the second line, but if the attack on Kursk was to be successful the strong defensive line had to be broken across the entire front.

As a result, on the morning of 7th July, the Germans prepared for the decisive breakthrough by trying to capture some of the many hills that dominated the area. SS Division Adolf Hitler and Das Reich attacked several of the entrenched hills on the southern front. Hot on the heels of the tanks was Private Kaufmann and his mobile anti-aircraft unit:

*"We reached the top of the ridge in a few minutes and saw Soviet troops fleeing out of range,"* Kaufmann later recalled. *"We could only enjoy the sight for a few minutes; then the first enemy artillery shells started hammering at us. We avoided the Soviet bombardment by driving backwards down the hill. The Russians tried again and again to retake the hill with counter-attacks. The fierce fighting lasted all day. Many German grenadiers lost their lives.*

*"In a Soviet counter-attack, one of my comrades from the other gun in our section was hit. He was carried away seriously wounded. I never heard from him again. He probably didn't survive. Attacks were followed by counter-attacks, and the fighting surged back and forth around the hilltops. This 'tipping back and forth' development of the battle seemed endless – attack, defence, counter-attack, retaliation and follow-up attacks followed each other in rapid succession."*

While Kaufmann fought in the hills, elsewhere German armoured columns broke through Soviet ►

### FACTS

The German Stuka dive bomber had been upgraded before the battle. The aircraft had been fitted with large anti-tank guns under the wings, which could easily penetrate the thin top armour of a Soviet tank.





**The new Wespe (Wasp) gun was the Germans' answer to the Red Army's "Stalin's Organ" – a self-propelled rocket battery. The Soviets' first encounter with the Wespe came at the Battle of Kursk.**

lines towards the village of Myasoyedovo. Here, for the first time, the army encountered the Red Army's new defensive methods. Tank commander Richard von Rosen, attached to a German Tiger tank unit, recalled what they saw:

*"We had not anticipated the extent of the expansion of the defences... The Russians had built a deep-layered defensive system with earth bunkers and anti-tank guns, superbly camouflaged and therefore difficult to spot. The grenadiers heaved a sigh of relief that they had us to get this enemy off their backs... We knocked out some of them and then felt our way cautiously forward.*

*"I was just thinking that we were through the defensive positions when more than 20 barrels flashed from countless anti-tank guns dug in on the forward slope of the rise. It was not possible to determine at first whether they had heavy-calibre guns and dug-in tanks there also. We stopped and then turned about for cover. Never before had we come across such a concentration of firepower."*

Von Rosen was forced to radio for air support: "Wave upon wave of Stukas with sirens wailing

*dived down on the Russian positions to give them hell. It was a brief but effective spectacle. Everything must have been totally churned over."*

The road to Myasoyedovo was now open to the Germans, and the village was duly captured that afternoon. Rosen and his unit of Tiger tanks were then ordered to investigate the area north of the town to see if it was possible to advance further.

*"I led, accompanied by Feldwebel Weigel's Tiger. Hatches shut, battle readiness, Panzer Marsch! [Tank March!] We rolled slowly down the long slope through open country towards the wood... Suddenly there was a flash. For a fraction of a second I could see the shell heading directly for me. It hit the bow of the panzer, and so did the second one... We received another hit, this time from the right. I pulled back and drove in reverse to our starting point. Both Tigers had some fresh scars each, but nothing had penetrated."*

The German attack stalled for the rest of the day.

## Mobile mines blocked the advance

While Rosen was halted by anti-tank guns, the Soviets also employed other methods to slow down the



The German army on the southern front gathers its strength for one final decisive push near the village of Prokhorovka.

The Germans make a decisive breakthrough. The Soviets deploy all tank reserves to the gap near the town of Prokhorovka. The Battle for Kursk must be decided now.

German tank columns. These included laying new minefields in front of German forces.

Workers and soldiers had already laid thousands of mines throughout the Kursk foothills, but mobile minelayer units were able to lay anti-tank mines during the battle exactly where the Germans targeted their attacks. Nikolai Gavrilovich Kiselev was a platoon leader in such a group of engineers from the 51st Guards Rifle Division:

*"I had three armoured vehicles equipped [with] anti-tank mines with detonators that were dropped while the vehicles were in motion. I led my armoured vehicle through the endless artillery bombardment. Our fighters flew in and scared the German bombers off, but enemy bombs still exploded all around us.*

*"A bomb hit the third vehicle in our column. When we reached Pokrovka, I saw a kilometre away that German tanks were coming towards us, hidden behind clouds of dust and smoke. Despite the constant shelling, I got my armoured vehicles into position and ordered mines laid to block two dirt roads to the north. In 15-20 minutes we laid 60 mines and quickly returned to battalion headquarters for more."*

Hundreds of similar vehicles plastered the battlefield with mines as the Germans advanced. Over the course of just two days, Kiselev's unit was responsible on its own for laying five minefields in front of the advancing Germans. Admittedly, mines like those laid by Kiselev were relatively easy for the Germans to detect and remove, as they weren't buried, but the task of clearing them was still time-consuming and took place under heavy bombardment.

The buried minefields were an even bigger problem for the Germans. Not least because of the geological conditions at Kursk, where the subsoil was unusually rich in iron. This made it almost impossible to use normal magnetic metal detectors to detect the buried mines, as they were constantly giving off false readings. Instead, sappers had to proceed in the old-fashioned way: methodically poking sticks into the ground to find ►

**German troops in the field had secret addresses. The area at the front where the letters were to be sent to and from had a five-digit code to disguise exactly where the unit was located.**

## Letter home from a German soldier

In boxes in the attic, in old chests of drawers and under beds, German families hid letters from their loved ones after World War II. Censorship allowed an astonishing amount of detail to pass and the letters, which have surfaced in recent years, therefore give historians a detailed insight into the everyday lives of German soldiers.

"We continued the attack along the road towards Oboyan and kept moving forward. I don't recall any particularly determined enemy resistance or minefields.

"We had good air support from our Stuka, especially the 'tank busters' under Captain Rudel. From my tank I saw several times how our planes attacked Russian tank columns from behind. The anti-tank guns under the wings could be clearly heard when they were fired, and usually the sound of an exploding tank followed. We passed whole columns of enemy tanks that had been wiped out by our air force.

"By comparison, enemy air forces were barely present in our sector. They played no part in the fighting. Only at night did an occasional plane drop a few bombs at random. It was more of a nuisance than a concerted attack. The weather was very good during the offensive. We had good visibility and advanced faster than was apparently expected. On several occasions we moved towards ground that was about to be bombed by our own Stuka and artillery. So our own bombs sometimes fell right in front of us – we always called it 'right on the edge'. We suffered no casualties from our own fire, however.

"We then reached the Novoselovka-Kochetovka line. It was already 9th July. We strengthened our position in the following days; however, an attack northwards was thwarted. The enemy attacked constantly in scattered, mixed formations of tanks and infantry, each about a battalion strong. We, the armoured forces, moved back and forth behind the front line in order to attack the enemy tanks. We always succeeded.

"I recall an incident on 10th or 11th July when leaflets were thrown down by our planes behind enemy lines calling on Soviet soldiers to desert. Quite a lot came of it, and it has to be said that quite a few Russians actually surrendered to us. The poor wretches were half-starved and the first thing they got from us was something to eat."

Lieutenant Eberhard Schöne, 15th Panzer Regiment, date unknown.





# Battle was decided in the clouds

Although the Battle of Kursk took place on the ground, it was partly decided in the air. For the Germans it was crucial to secure air superiority so that the German dive bombers could support the panzer divisions.

**T**he Battle of Kursk was not only the greatest tank battle in world history, it was also one of the greatest air battles ever fought. Some 2,300 German fighters and bombers faced around 2,800 Soviet aircraft in the gigantic battle that unfolded in the clouds above the tank columns.

Luftwaffe commander Hermann Göring was as optimistic as ever, promising Hitler that the German pilots would have total air supremacy to pave the way for the panzer divisions. Göring had previously let Hitler down during the Battle of Britain, when he made similar promises, and once again the Luftwaffe chief's optimism would cost the Germans dearly.

To ensure German victory, the Luftwaffe had laid out a clear plan of operation. German pilots were to begin their first missions as early

as possible on 5th July, attacking large concentrations of Soviet aircraft at their air bases in the Kursk area. Other pilots were to mercilessly bomb the strong Red Army artillery positions that the Germans had observed.

Thereafter the German pilots were to concentrate their formations to support a rapid breakthrough for the armoured divisions. The Luftwaffe's task was, as Göring saw it, to drive the attacking force on.

Alongside their initial bombardment, German pilots were required to fly continuous reconnaissance missions with particular emphasis on spotting enemy deployment zones and reserves – especially tanks – as quickly as possible.

The tactic worked at first. On 5th July alone, the Soviet air force lost about 300 aircraft,

while the German losses were only 40. The pre-emptive strike gave the Germans a clear advantage in the air during the first week of fighting at Kursk. "The Stuka played a major role in the success of our attack. At the same time, I don't remember the enemy air force being an obstacle to us. For us, the Soviet air force was nothing to worry about," recalled German tank commander Wilhelm Kendziora of the first week of fighting.

But as time passed, more and more German aircraft were ordered away from the Kursk Front to defend other parts of the Eastern Front, while new reinforcements arrived for the Soviet air units. Before long, the Soviets would take over in the air, and Göring's promises would once again be broken. The Luftwaffe no longer ruled the airspace over the Eastern Front.



**Hermann Göring**

**Hermann Göring was head of the Luftwaffe. The decadent Nazi again proved unable to live up to his promises – with disastrous consequences.**



the mines without detonating them. It was a slow and dangerous process that was almost suicidal under fire.

In places where the Germans did break through, the Soviet defenders also deployed tank reserves to counter-attack. This was the experience of Lieutenant Walter Schaefer-Kehnert on the southern front:

*"I'd moved a little to the side from our attack spearhead in my vehicle to get a good opportunity to make observations from high up and had just formed an overview of the terrain when I noticed that at a distance of three kilometres from us a group of 20-30 enemy tanks was rolling towards us, on their way to hit our formation from the flank. It was an amazing sight that each steel column had taken its place in a long formation and was attacking us. As I could see through my battery commander's sight, these enemy forces included KV-1 tanks. This type of tank was much feared by our combat units."*

Before Schaefer-Kehnert could worry too much, however, help arrived from the skies.

*"Suddenly a group of Stuka circled over our heads. I can't remember how many. They pounced on the enemy formation like raptors on prey. Soon the battlefield was shrouded in smoke and fumes. One of the KV-1s was hit by a direct hit from one of the Stuka bombs. The tank was flung into the air and landed upside down. Our tanks moved into position to receive the enemy, but no further attack came. The Stuka had a devastating effect."*

Over the next few days, the German panzer troops painstakingly battled their way northwards, under constant counter-attack from Soviet armoured forces. Staff Sergeant Petr Petrovich Ivanov took part in one of the more or less hopeless Soviet counter-attacks to stop the German advance:

*"In the morning we were ordered to attack and destroy the German tanks and infantry that had broken through our lines somewhere south of us. Our tank brigade moved forward in two columns followed by a battalion and motorised infantry units. The Germans began to fire artillery at us, but we were ordered to move faster."*

The Soviets' tactic was to counter-attack aggressively and with force. The Red Army deployed large reserves every time the Germans broke through and did so again. With shells exploding all around them, the Soviet tanks now charged fearlessly at the Germans to beat them back.

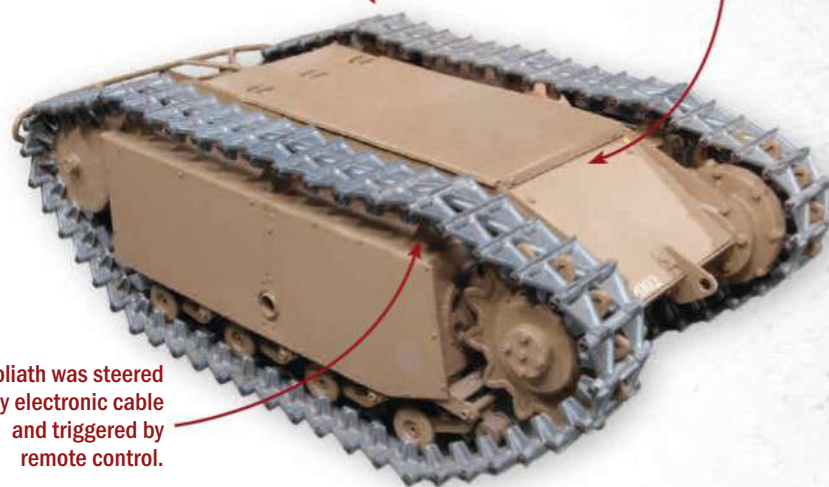
*"We spotted the German tanks when we were about two kilometres from them. We continued forward towards them. We opened fire when we got within 1.5 kilometres of their tanks. I attacked fearlessly – I was very excited. Only later did I realise that it was optimism born of ignorance,"* Ivanov later admitted.

*"The Germans were not shooting at us yet. Much later I learned that their guns only had a*

The German self-propelled Goliath tracked mine was used on the Kursk Front.

The 1.5-metre mine was commissioned in 1942 and could be directed towards a tank and detonated.

Goliath was steered by electronic cable and triggered by remote control.



range of a kilometre or less [not true – Ed]. When the German tanks began their shelling and one hit the turret of my tank, my enthusiasm waned, but I continued onwards in the front line."

Before long, the two tank units were locked together, fighting at close quarters. The Soviet tank commanders deliberately moved in close to the enemy because they knew they couldn't hurt the German tanks unless they could come alongside to fire on the thinner side armour.

*"The tank battle lasted for several hours. We could not advance. In fact, we had to withdraw as the Germans began to surround the flanks of our tank brigade. That's when I got a bit scared."*

During the retreat, the Germans bombarded the Soviet tanks with artillery.

*"An artillery shell hit our tank," Ivanov recalled. "The shell did not penetrate, but a piece of armour was knocked off the inside of the tank by the shell. It wounded our gunner's shoulder. For the first time in my life I saw a wound and so much blood. I could smell it. I wrapped a bandage tightly on his wound so he could continue firing."*

### Attacks ended in bloodbath

General Vatutin, who commanded the Soviet Voronezh Front in the south, had several mechanised corps at his disposal, far outnumbering the Germans. But he found it difficult to coordinate his forces. Soviet tanks often attacked in large groups with no artillery or air support, making them easy prey for German anti-tank guns and tanks.

*"We were particularly impressed by the thrust and relentlessness which marked the Soviet ▶*

### DID YOU KNOW?

It was difficult for pilots to navigate in the air over Kursk. The area around the city is rich in iron, so the planes' compass failed to work correctly. The phenomenon is known as the Kursk Magnetic Anomaly.



*forces' attack – again, not as a coordinated effort,”* noted German Tiger tank commander and officer cadet Kendziora. *“Thus, we were able to shoot one attack after another to pieces. Soviet losses were exorbitant, but this did not serve to diminish the Soviet soldiers' fighting spirit.”*

An example of the numerical imbalance between the German tanks and the Soviets took place on 8th July, when 22-year-old SS-Unterscharführer Franz Staudegger set out alone in his Tiger tank after a long day's fighting to join back up with his platoon in the 13th (Heavy) Company. In the evening gloom, he finally encountered another tank. The tank was stationary but hadn't noticed Staudegger's arrival, so the commander got out to meet it. He could just make out the glow from a cigarette that the driver was smoking on top of the other tank.

As Staudegger approached, he realised to his horror that it wasn't a tank from his own unit, but a T-34. Without thinking, he pulled out a hand grenade and threw it into the open hatch of the Soviet tank, whose crew was killed by the explosion. But the now-burning tank illuminated another T-34 behind it, which Staudegger also disabled by tossing another grenade through the hatch. A few days later, Staudegger was in the line of fire again as he and another Tiger tank came up against 50 Soviet T-34 tanks. But their 76-mm shells couldn't penetrate the front armour of Staudegger's Tiger, and despite being hit 67 times, the tank survived as Staudegger claimed 22 Soviet tank kills.

Clearly, the constant Soviet armour attacks weren't having much effect, something noted by Lieutenant General Ivan Chistyakov of the 6th Guards Army:

*“Our flank attack did not lead to the desired result. We were stopped by a strong enemy force of tanks and artillery. The front commander ordered us, in order to avoid further losses, to take a new defensive line.”*

Nevertheless, on 9th July new orders came in for II SS Panzer Corps, which led the German attack in the south. Its advance was now diverted to the north-east rather than moving directly north. German High Command expected Soviet armoured forces to arrive from the east and wanted to meet them near the village of Prokhorovka.

At the same time, the Soviets were making their own preparations. Soviet observers reported that the German infantry was digging in, which the Red Army saw as a sign that the steam had gone out of the German offensive. Now was the time to strike back with enormous force. In the north, the Soviets had already planned a major counter-offensive, Operation Kutuzov, to begin on 12th July. Alongside this they now moved hundreds of tanks and thousands of troops to make a synchronous attack on the southern front – in the area west of Prokhorovka. The world's largest tank battle was about to reach its climax. ■





**After three days of gruelling battles,  
the Soviets prepared to fight back.  
Planes, tanks and fresh soldiers from the  
Steppe Front were shipped to the front.**





# How a German tank attack took place

## CREW consisted of five men

German tanks typically carried one more man than Soviet tanks. He was the radio operator, who helped make the space inside the tank's small cabin even more cramped.

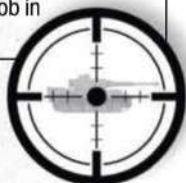
It was like fighting inside a sardine tin. That's how German tank crews described life in their armoured vehicles. In a moving metal container filled with highly explosive ammunition, the five crewmen actually had a great deal of autonomy when battle was in full flow. German tank commanders were often given general orders, such as "Protect height 32", and from there had to choose their tactics depending on the

circumstances. The crews' roles were highly specialised. Recruits were put through a demanding assessment programme and then assigned according to ability. Skilled truck drivers were spotted at military schools and retrained to drive tanks, where they were naturally assigned the role of driver, while talented riflemen were sent to tank schools and trained in tank sighting systems and how to

identify enemy tanks. In this way, German tanks and armoured divisions had the very best soldiers in the army, sometimes fighting in the little sardine tin for hours at a time. Inside, conditions became almost unbearable. Extreme heat and gunpowder smoke filled the cabin, mixed with the smell of urine and faeces, which the crew disposed of in empty casings from fired shells during combat.

### Gunner

The gunner was responsible for aiming and range-finding and had arguably the most important job in the tank.



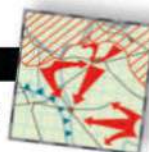
### Loader

In the tank's confined space, the loader could quickly load the gun with the right type of shell from a choice of eight.



### Commander

The crew's leader kept track of the combat's progress, selected targets and made important decisions in the heat of battle.



### Driver

Responsible for rapidly changing speed and direction depending on the progress of the battle.

### Radio operator

Received orders by radio from the division's leader, among others, and relayed them to the commander.





# ATTACK

## was improvised

Right from the start of WWII, the German Army gave its soldiers and officers an enormous degree of freedom. The Germans were able to improvise and carry out their tasks however they deemed appropriate.

### 2) Platoon leader elaborated

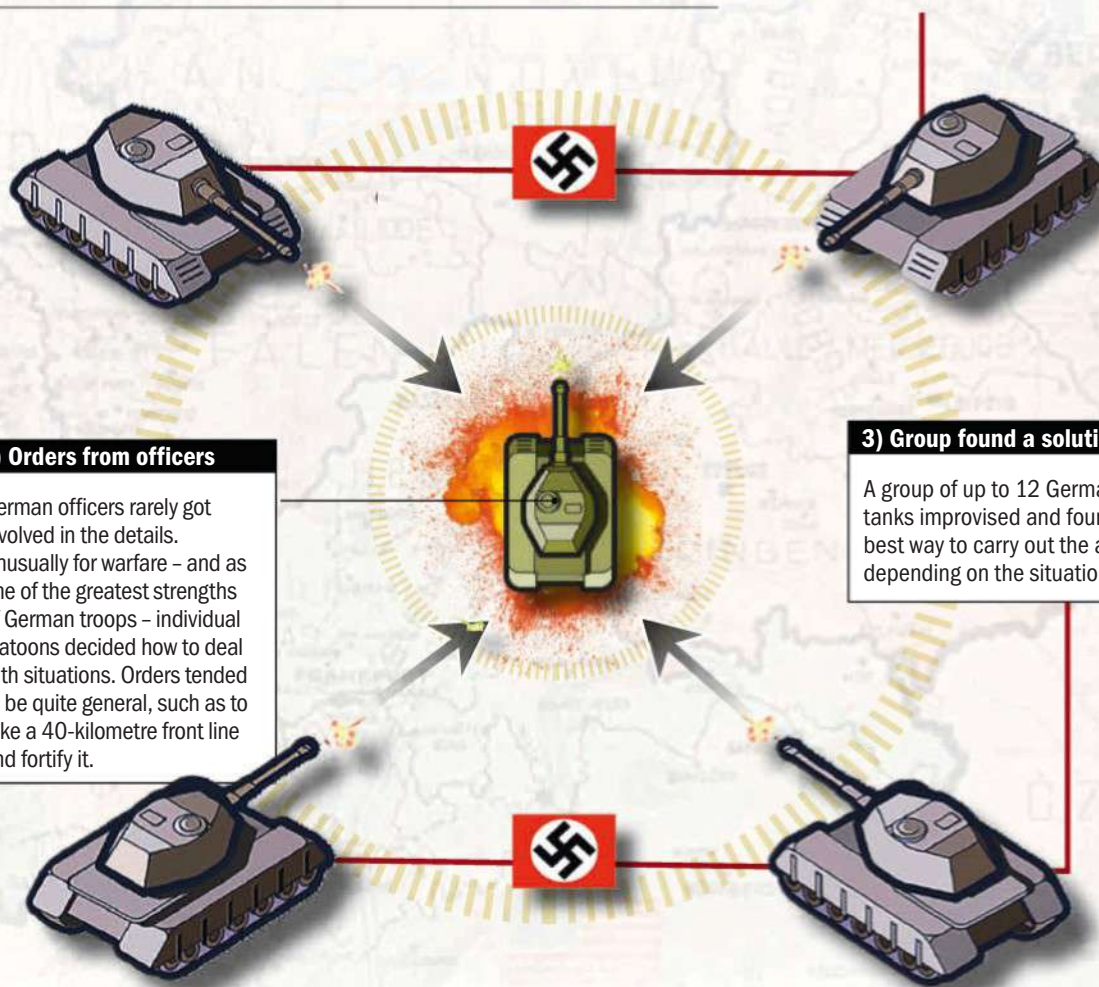
The platoon leader led his tank groups in the same way. One group was ordered to secure a bridge, another a railway station, but the platoon leader did not interfere with how they did it.

### 1) Orders from officers

German officers rarely got involved in the details. Unusually for warfare – and as one of the greatest strengths of German troops – individual platoons decided how to deal with situations. Orders tended to be quite general, such as to take a 40-kilometre front line and fortify it.

### 3) Group found a solution

A group of up to 12 German tanks improvised and found the best way to carry out the attack, depending on the situation.



## Germans had two types of tank

The classic tank was an offensive weapon, capable of breaking down defensive positions and penetrating trenches. These types of tanks were available to the Germans throughout the war, but in time they also needed a specialised vehicle that could fight enemy tanks. These tank

destroyers had an extra-thick armoured shell and were fitted with heavy guns that could shoot through any armour. However, they were slow, and often the gun could only be rotated to a limited extent. Instead, destroyers lay in wait for the perfect shot.



**Tank**

For example, the classic Panzer I-IV and Tiger tanks.



**Tank destroyer**

Such as the Nashorn, Elephant and later Jagdpanther.



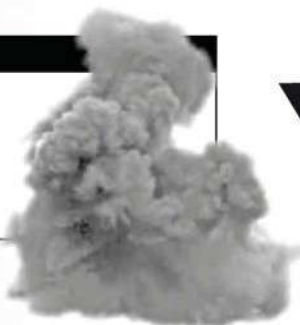
# SHELLS

## for any purpose

As many as eight different types of shell were available to German tank crews, but only six were part of the general arsenal. They could, however, be used for almost any task.

### Smoke

White phosphorus shells were used to conceal attacks and retreats on the battlefield.



### Armour-piercing

The most common armour-piercing shell was not the best for destroying an enemy tank, but it was better than the high-explosive shells.



### Improved armour-piercing

Coated with soft steel on the tip, which stuck to the target when it hit, increasing the angle of attack and penetration. The steel casing reduced speed and accuracy, so the shell was best at close range.



### High-explosive

Tanks used high-explosive shells most often. They were perfect for destroying houses, guns and defensive positions because they exploded on impact.



### High-velocity armour-piercing

By the end of the war, by adding the rare metal tungsten the Germans could produce armour-piercing shells, which maintained their accuracy and velocity.



### Chemical high-explosive

Chemical shells easily and effectively cut through even thick armour before exploding inside the tank.





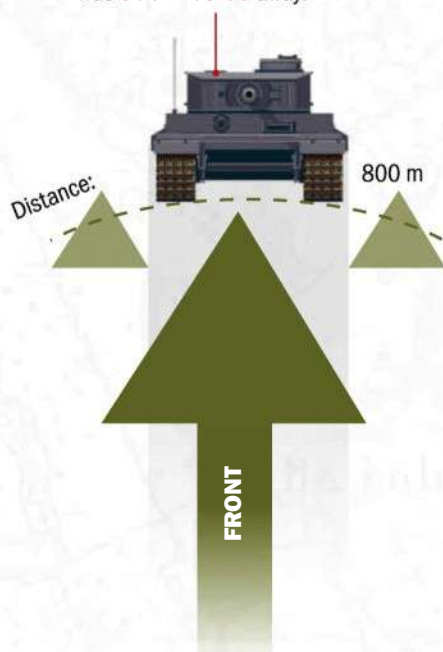
# SIGHT

## made the difference

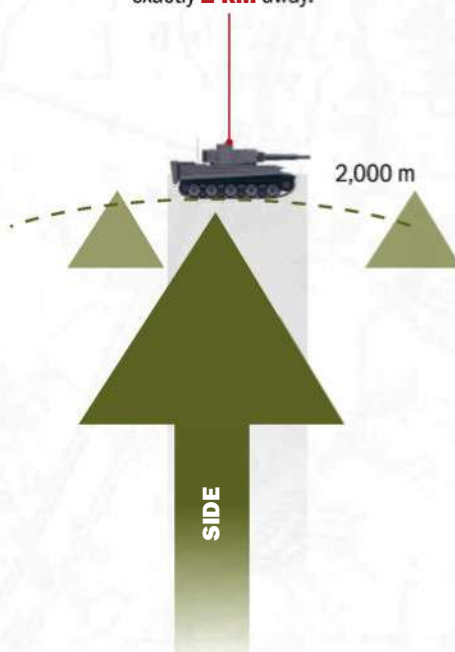
German tanks had a simple but effective sighting system. If the gunner could recognise the tank type and judge the distance to the enemy, he could hit any target.

Throughout the war, German tank crews were the best at hitting their targets, destroying up to **six enemies** for each tank they lost.

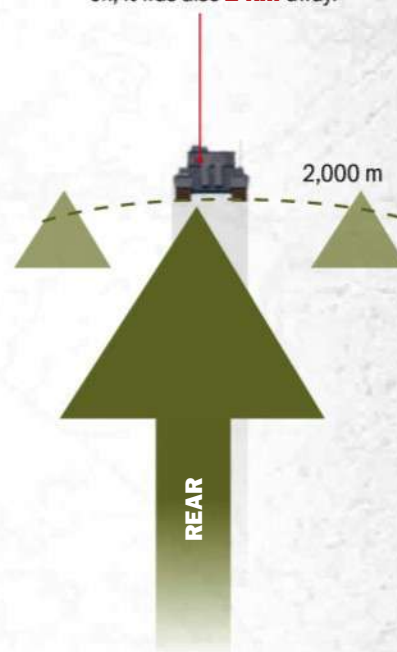
If a Russian T-34 tank filled the entire sight (four clicks), front on, the enemy was **800 metres** away.



If a T-34 filled three quarters of the sight, side on, it was exactly **2 km** away.



If the tank filled three eighths of the sight, rear on, it was also **2 km** away.



### Aiming method

In the tank's periscope, the gunner could see two green arrows on either side of the sight. The Germans called the distance between them "four clicks". Depending on how many clicks an enemy tank filled, the gun could calculate the distance.

### Distance assessment

The German gunners knew exactly how long and wide the enemy tanks were. Once the tank type was identified, the gunner could quickly work out how far away it was, whether he saw it sideways or from the front.

### Firing

After identifying the type of tank and judging the distance using the sight, the gunner set the gun and prepared to fire. The shells were so fast that the Germans rarely had to take account of the enemy tank's speed.

## Night sights came too late

In February 1945, German weapons engineers declared that what they called the Vampir was ready for use. The Vampir was a high-tech night sight that German machine gunners and snipers had tested as a prototype during 1944. Soviet Eastern Front veterans reported that the

night sights scared the life out of the Red Army, because suddenly the enemy could strike accurately at night and move troops in the darkness before they attacked.

Unfortunately for the Germans, the Vampir never made it aboard their tanks. The first

models were developed exclusively for and used only by regular soldiers who fought on foot, despite the fact that the night sights weighed as much as 16 kg, of which the battery formed by far the heaviest part. The sight would have therefore been far better suited to a tank.





# DEATH MATCH ON THE PLAIN

The battle lasted until the last ammunition was used. We wiped out the last tank as it reached exactly 30 yards from our position.

German Corporal Kurt Sametreiter manning an anti-tank position on the northern front.



# Prokhorovka, 12th July 1943



*The German soldiers were battle-weary and had suffered heavy casualties as the Wehrmacht brought its remaining forces to a decisive battle near the village of Prokhorovka.*



# Death match on the plain

**On 12th July, German panzer corps attempted to advance to the village of Prokhorovka in a last attempt to close the Kursk pocket. There, three German and five Soviet armoured divisions came together with immense force in a chaotic struggle to win the battle. By the end of the day, the Battle of Kursk was decided.**

By Benjamin Christensen

**O**n the morning of 12th July, Obersturmführer Rudolf von Ribbentrop and his unit stood not far from the village of Prokhorovka on the southern front of the Battle of Kursk. The evening before, the young officer had been told to prepare his company of tanks for a major attack by Soviet armoured units. Now von Ribbentrop waited in suspense.

*"The infantry had made some observation which made them think they might have to fight tanks. I did not envy them. From our perspective as tankers, a Russian T-34 looked rather different than it did to an infantry soldier in his foxhole,"* the son of German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop recalled as he stood ready to defend his homeland at the front.

On that day, the Germans would require all able-bodied men – and tanks.

Von Ribbentrop sipped his malt coffee substitute in the turret of his tank as he scanned the horizon, where enemy movements could be traced using smoke signals from units along the front line.

*"In front of us on the hill there rose a purple smokescreen. It was sent up by the flare cartridges, the signal designated for that day as a tank warning. The considerable number of such purple smoke clusters rising into the air indicated that evidently a major tank attack by the Russians was underway."*

Hundreds of Soviet tanks were pounding von Ribbentrop and the German units. The Red Army had launched its counterstrike south of Kursk. Earlier in July, the Soviets had watched the German panzer units laboriously work their way through the well-prepared defensive lines around Kursk, but they'd not done so idly. Red Army generals had simultaneously

plotted a major counter-attack using their huge reserves – designated the Steppe Front. Now it and all available tanks were to be deployed.

In the days before the attack, Soviet troops along the front had been ordered to brace themselves and wait for reinforcements. Infantry officer Georgi Gubkin stressed the importance of digging in:

*"The Soldier's 13th Commandment. It is better to dig 10 metres of trenches than a three-metre grave."*

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of fresh soldiers had transferred to the front, accompanied by hundreds of tanks. Summer had set in over Kursk, and Boris Nazarov, part of the crew of a self-propelled gun, recalled the hardships the reinforcements endured even before they reached the front:

*"We drove all night and the following day. Despite the fact that the hatches were open, the heat inside the vehicle was unbelievable. [Commander] Ivanych barred us from sticking our heads out of them, so we were sitting inside stripped almost naked."*

The march to the front was so gruelling that Soviet units were reporting casualties before they'd reached the front. Soldiers collapsed from heat stroke and exhaustion, while vehicles ground to a halt as their engines were destroyed by the huge clouds of dust whirled up by the columns. A Soviet general noted that *"such a difficult march could not help but tell on the state of the corps' material"*, and the number of combat and transport vehicles that broke down steadily grew. The difficult terrain, bridges with poor load-bearing capacity, the absence of good fording sites – all contributed to the number of accidents and breakdowns. One tank brigade found on reaching the front that 12 T-34 and seven light tanks had failed to arrive because they'd *"fallen behind due to technical breakdowns"*.

But Stavka – the Soviet High Command – viewed the losses as acceptable; all that mattered was getting enough men to the front to slow the German advance and launch a counter-attack.

General Pavel Rotmistrov's 5th Guards Tank Army would lead the counter-offensive. The tank army was ordered to launch a major assault near the village of Prokhorovka, where the German II SS Panzer Corps was close to breaking through. Outside Prokhorovka, von Ribbentrop's 1st SS Panzer Division Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler had taken up a defensive position

## **RUDOLF VON RIBBENTROP** (1921-2019)

was the son of German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, who negotiated the 1939 non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union and the agreement that divided Poland between the two countries. He fought against the Soviet Union on the Eastern Front as commander in the Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler panzer division.







**The Germans deployed all reserves. Both older tanks and the last Tiger tanks were sent on to the battlefield in a desperate attempt to make a breakthrough.**

while waiting for another SS division, Totenkopf, to secure its flank and continue the offensive.

### **SS division secured important bridge**

The 3rd SS Panzer Division Totenkopf started by attacking the Psel River west of Prokhorovka to secure a crossing, but by chance ran directly into Rotmistrov's 5th Guards, which was on its way to the front. The Soviets were caught by surprise and the commander of the 42nd Guards Field Division, Lieutenant General Aleksey Zhadov, summed up the situation:

*"I have to admit that we had not anticipated that events at the front would develop so rapidly and that we would not be able to take up defensive positions in time... Also, in marching to the front, we did not form strong forward detachments. This led to a situation in which the divisions' main force had to deploy directly under enemy fire."*

The Soviets' situation wasn't helped by the lack of ammunition across several units, because the support troops hadn't the resources to quickly deploy them during the rapid advance. The supply situation was even worse for the infantry units set to take part in the attack. The 6th Guards Airborne Division, for example, had

only 6,903 rifles and machine guns for the division's 8,916 soldiers. Some of the soldiers were also newly trained, such as Lieutenant Ilya Nikolayevich Kozlov, who arrived almost directly from the military academy:

*"I finished the expedited four-month programme of the Suvorov Infantry School and became a lieutenant," he later recounted.*

On the morning of 11th July, Kozlov was one of the soldiers facing the SS Division Totenkopf's attack:

*"A division was fighting a defensive battle in front of us. All of a sudden, we received an order from the battalion commander to switch ... to the offence against the German troops, which had broken through the division located in front of us. We moved forward a little bit, but then were attacked by tanks and infantry."*

The untested Red Army soldiers would have to draw on the experience of those few officers who had actual combat experience.

*"Captain Bugrov, the battalion commander, was a very experienced commander. He participated in the Stalingrad battle. He managed to turn our battalion around under cover of the gun company and mortars. My platoon was in the first echelon ►*



# German soldier admired his brave enemies

German Alfred Rubbel was part of the 1st Company of the German 503rd Heavy Panzer Battalion, which took part in the fighting on 12th July with its Tiger tanks. In a letter home, he described the Soviet soldiers his unit faced: their fighting spirit, officers and their skills as soldiers.

"The common Russian soldier fought relentlessly and bravely, he would rather be beaten to death in his post than run away. If, however, tendencies within the group triggered such a reaction everyone more or less panicked and took flight. The Russian soldier was by far better accustomed to bearing adversities than were our own men. [He] was a master of making use of the environment, camouflaging his positions and improvising.

"When fear took hold everyone appeared paralysed by it. Hardly anyone had the guts to take the initiative and do something. With us, that was different. It was mostly our battle-hardened sergeants on the lower command level who would take the initiative, maintain order and keep things under control. Generally, however, the Russian soldier fought doggedly and this was more evenly noticeable throughout now compared to the campaigns in 1941 and 1942. Leadership quality on the lower command level [compared to our NCOs] was not good.

"We experienced for the first time during Operation Citadel that tanks were led by tank commanders. Apparently, this was to remove a major deficiency within the Soviet armoured corps. Much that would be called the art of war, however, had not been mastered although it was second nature for any of our leaders on the lower command level. This included, for instance, moving forward in a coordinated formation during an attack.

"As a military force on the battlefield, we always felt we had the edge over the enemy. This was not due to any degree of arrogance, but was well founded in our daily observations in battle. We were simply better in terms of leadership in our units, skill in using our weapons and overall cooperation of forces. To me the decisive factor seemed to be that all leaders from the lowest level of tank commander up through the ranks had been trained to rely on their own judgment in making decisions in respect to the overall objective. That was our strength, not our soldiers' bravery, which the Russian soldier had no less to offer."

*and we managed to dig in quickly. It was very timely because the German aviation arrived and started bombing us for an hour. After that German tanks and infantry started to show up."*

The German attack ran straight into Kozlov's unit.

*"Our task was to fire at the German infantry, cutting them from their tanks and making them lay prone so our mortars could shoot at them. We performed this task, but I lost six people who were killed and about ten to 12 people wounded. It was half of my platoon.*

*"About 12 German tanks broke into the area occupied by a company next to us... We never saw those tanks again. They were probably destroyed... Nevertheless the battalion commander withdrew us about one to 1.5 kilometres in the afternoon."*

## Terrain slowed Soviet advance

The Germans had managed to advance just enough to capture a bridgehead on the north bank of the Psel River, from which they could threaten the west side of Prokhorovka. Despite the fierce fighting, the skirmishes were only a prelude to the huge tank battle that would follow the next day. The Soviets were planning a massive counter-offensive with units from the 5th Guards Tank Army.

Hundreds of tanks would attack across a narrow front made even tighter by a deep ravine impassable to tanks. The terrain forced the Soviet tanks into a narrow column rather than their usual large, open formations. Until they had pushed past the ravine and reached open ground, the tanks were extremely vulnerable and caught in a murderous fire from three sides. The advance was a suicide mission, but there was no other way to penetrate the area.

Regimental Commander Hellmuth Becker of SS Division Totenkopf was with his panzer unit at the front when the Soviet reserves began their huge counter-attack on 12th July.

*"I noticed clouds of dust on the horizon ... soon Russian tanks began to emerge from these dust*



**Alfred Rubbel received a medal for at least 25 tank kills during the Battle of Kursk and survived the war.**



**Our task was to fire at the German infantry, cutting them from their tanks. ■ Soviet Lieutenant Ilya Nikolayevich Kozlov on the role of his platoon.**

clouds. *'The Russians have advanced their reserves,' I said to my chief of staff, and I understood ... we had lost the battle for Kursk.*"

One of the Nazis' great tank commanders, Michael Wittmann, and his platoon of Tiger tanks were not quite as despondent. On the morning of 12th July, his unit was rolling towards Prokhorovka when it received word over the radio from German reconnaissance units.

*"Achtung! Strong force of enemy tanks approaching from ahead! Many tanks!"*

Barely a minute later, the huge Soviet tank army appeared on the horizon. Wittmann whistled softly at the sight: *"There are at least 100 tanks, some T-70s but mostly T-34s!"* the experienced commander relayed to his crew. *"Engage from a stationary position. Range: 1,800 metres plus!"*

What followed was a demonstration of the renowned skill and communication of the German panzer commanders. In almost perfect synchronicity, all the Tiger tanks opened fire with their huge 88-mm guns to rain death on the Soviet tank columns.

One Soviet tank commander recalled how tanks were on fire everywhere. Huge explosions sent five-tonne gun turrets flying six metres through the air. Some explosions were so powerful that entire tanks were turned into piles of scrap metal.

But despite the shelling, the Red Army continued its relentless advance, and before long German and Soviet tanks were embroiled in close combat. The Germans' advantages lay in keeping their distance and a relative order to the battle. But in the confusion and chaos that ensued, communication and firepower no longer mattered. Now manoeuvrability and numbers were crucial, and here the Soviets had the

advantage. Suddenly, Wittmann's radio yelled a warning: *"Achtung! Enemy is behind you."*

Wittmann's driver immediately accelerated, and what would have been a killer strike from a Soviet tank just a few yards away whizzed past. Soon after, though, there was a huge bang as a burning Soviet tank slammed into Wittmann's Tiger at full speed.

*"Back up!"* ordered the commander, and once again the German tank crew managed to escape the raging firestorm. They were even able to help the crew of another Tiger tank who were forced to abandon their burning vehicle. The Prokhorovka plain was now a chaotic inferno.

### **Germans took the slope**

To the west of Wittmann's unit, Rudolf von Ribbentrop and his unit of seven German Panzer IV tanks rolled over the ridge in front of them to take up position on the opposite slope.

*"As we drove down the forward slope we spotted the first T-34s, which were apparently attempting to outflank us from the left. We halted on the slope and opened fire, hitting several of the enemy. A number of Russian tanks were left burning. For a good gunner, 800 metres was the ideal range."*

*"As we waited to see if further enemy tanks were going to appear, I looked all around, as was my habit. What I saw left me speechless. From beyond the shallow rise, about 150 to 200 metres in front of me, appeared 15, then 30, then 40 tanks. Finally, there were too many to count. The T-34s were rolling towards us at high speed, carrying mounted infantry."*

*"I had poked the gunner in the right side with my foot. This was the signal for him to traverse ►*

**Tank ace Michael Wittmann (centre) took part in the battle with his crew. Wittmann later fought in Normandy against Allied forces.**





*right. Soon the first shell was on its way and with the impact the T-34 began to burn. It was only 50 to 70 metres from us.*

The German guns' ideal range of 800 metres was now negated by the fact the battle had turned into close-quarters combat, and it wasn't long before the Soviet and German tank formations were thoroughly mixed together in one chaotic jumble of shells, clouds of dust and tanks in various stages of distress: firing, burning, or frantically fleeing the enemy.

*"At the same instant, the tank next to me took a direct hit," Ribbentrop recalled. "His neighbour was also hit, and soon it, too, was in flames. We had no time to take up defensive positions. All we could do was fire. From this range every shot was a hit, but when would a direct hit end it for us? Somewhere in my subconscious I realised that there was no chance of escape."*

The men in von Ribbentrop's tank nevertheless continued to fire away in desperation.

*"We knocked out a third, then a fourth T-34, from distances of less than 30 metres... Soon my loader shouted: 'No armour-piercing left!' Further ammunition had to be passed to the loader by the gunner, radio operator and driver. We turned in the midst of a mass of Russian tanks, rolled back about 50 metres and reached the back slope of the first rise. There we turned to face the enemy again, now in somewhat better cover."*

*"Just then a T-34 halted about 30 metres diagonally to our right. I saw the tank rock slightly on its suspension and traverse its turret in our direction. I was looking right down the muzzle of its gun. We were unable to fire immediately, as the gunner had just passed the loader a fresh round."*

*"Panzer forward, move!" I shouted into the microphone... We drove past the T-34 at a distance of about five metres. The Russian tried to turn his turret to follow us, but was unable to do so. We halted 10 metres behind the stationary T-34 and turned. My gunner scored a direct hit on the Russian's turret. The T-34 exploded, and its turret flew about three metres through the air, almost striking my tank's gun."*

Despite their ongoing success, the danger was far from over. Ribbentrop and his group of tanks found themselves alone on the battlefield, surrounded by hundreds of enemies. Fortunately for them, the Soviets failed to notice the Germans in the confusion, instead continuing their attack forward and past von Ribbentrop's group. But the Germans knew it would only be a matter of time before the Soviets noticed them – especially as a large swastika flag fluttered on the outside of von Ribbentrop's tank.

*"We had only one slim chance: we must remain constantly in motion. A stationary tank would be immediately recognised by the foe as an enemy*

*and fired upon, because all the Russian tanks were rolling at high speed across the terrain. We now faced the additional danger of being destroyed by one of our own tanks... On the smoke- and dust-shrouded battlefield, looking into the sun, it would be impossible for our crews to distinguish us from a Russian tank. I repeatedly broadcast our code-name: 'Kunibert here! We are in the midst of the Russian tanks! Don't fire at us!' I received no answer."*

In the chaos and under the thick cover of smoke, von Ribbentrop's tank miraculously avoided being spotted by the Soviets or being subject to friendly fire.

*"Suddenly, ahead of us I saw a dense mass of Russian infantry and called to the driver: 'Turn slightly to the left!' Seconds later he spotted them. Machine guns firing, we rolled through the mass of troops from behind, who did not realise that they were being overtaken by a German tank."*

### **Soviets walked into trap at bridge**

At a tank trench, which was only passable at one point via a bridge, the Germans managed to slow down the huge Soviet attack for the first time. Von Ribbentrop observed the chaos that ensued as the Red Army attempted to cross the narrow bridge.

*"[Russian tanks] were storming toward the bridge from every direction. This made it easier for us and our battalion to find our targets. Burning T-34s drove into and over one another. It was a total inferno of fire and smoke... T-34s blazed, while the wounded tried to crawl away to the sides. Just then I heard my loader report... We had expended our entire supply of armour-piercing ammunition. Now all we had left on board were high-explosive shells, which were ineffective against the heavily-armoured T-34s."*

*"Initially I held my fire. Then I heard my gunner cry out. I heard him blurt out, 'My eye! My eye!' We had taken an unlucky hit on the turret precisely at the tiny opening for the gunner's sight. The shell had not penetrated all the way through, but far enough to drive the sight backward with terrific force. My gunner, who had been peering through the sight, suffered a serious head injury as a result."*

Von Ribbentrop's guns and tank were left disabled, but before long he was able to switch to another tank and return to battle. By midday, the Germans had recaptured the hill where they'd started the day.

Von Ribbentrop and his tank crew destroyed a total of 14 Soviet tanks during the day, and the young officer was awarded the Knight's Cross for his efforts. While the Soviets were forced to abandon the attack across the bridge, it appeared the Red Army would get the breakthrough it had hoped for when, at around 09.15, an armoured column advanced along a ►



# Soviet troops were rewarded with roubles for their heroism

Soviet soldiers were driven by more than fear of punishment to embark on suicidal missions. Stalin himself ordered a bonus system be put in place to ensure Communist heroes could secure lucrative bonuses.

In addition to their normal rations and pay, Soviet soldiers could earn extra money if they were skilled and fearless enough to, for example, single-handedly destroy an enemy

tank. The reward was 1,000 roubles, a princely sum and almost double the normal monthly wage of a factory worker. Over time, bonus schemes in the Red Army grew to cover acts of

personal heroism for everyone from infantry divisions to tank squads and even Air Force pilots, with incentives ranging from 500 to 2,000 roubles for select actions.

## ANTI-TANK BONUSES

If you were a commander in an anti-tank unit, you received a 500-rouble bonus for each enemy armoured vehicle you destroyed. The rest of your crew had to settle for 200 roubles for their part in the deed. The same scheme applied to crews of Soviet tanks who destroyed a German tank.

## INDIVIDUAL HEROISM

If you had the courage to climb on top of an enemy tank and destroy it with a well-placed grenade through a hatch or a Molotov cocktail in the exhaust, you would earn the biggest reward in the Red Army: 1,000 roubles. With it, you could buy, say, 2.5 kilograms of meat on the inflation-ridden Soviet black market.

## BOMB THE ENEMY

There was money to be made in the Air Force, too. Long-range bombing missions far behind enemy lines triggered a cash bonus of 500 roubles for the entire crew of the few planes that survived the trip.

## ATTACK BERLIN

The Soviet armed forces' largest bonus was reserved for those few pilots who served on long-range TB-7/Pe-8 and Yer-2 bombers, the only ones with the range to reach all the way to Berlin and bomb the enemy capital. The attacks were something of a suicide mission, and those pilots who miraculously survived the trip were rewarded with up to 2,000 roubles.

*Fresh recruits in the Steppe Front were encouraged to fight with equal parts threats and rewards.*





railway line, where German Corporal Kurt Sametreiter and his platoon lay in wait with five anti-tank guns. The Soviets launched their attack with a burst of rockets. Then the T-34 tanks came rolling at full speed, firing at Sametreiter's defensive position.

*"We opened fire with our five guns," the platoon leader later recalled. "After about ten seconds, the first T-34 was ablaze and smoke shrouded the terrain. Sometimes we had to hold our fire because our own Panzergrenadiere leaped on to the T-34s and destroyed them with close-combat weapons. Then we opened fire again."*

Despite this success, a group of Soviet tanks managed to cross the railway under fire to launch

an attack on Sametreiter and his men from the opposite flank.

*"We had to turn the guns around. The battle lasted until the last ammunition was used up. We wiped out the last enemy tank when it was exactly 30 yards from our position. The Russian tank attack was repulsed. The number of attacking Russian tanks must have increased to about 120,"* Sametreiter noted, and the area around the German gun position bore witness to the heavy fighting, littered with burnt-out Soviet tanks.

Again and again, Soviet armoured units attacked, but their offensive was poorly coordinated. German officer cadet Günther Baer later recalled how his





platoon leader marvelled at the Red Army's poor use of its tank forces throughout the battle:

*"If the Soviets would refrain from deploying this huge amount of tanks piecemeal, but instead in the framework of a coordinated attack, we would simply be blown away by their numerical superiority."*

But the Soviets rarely managed to coordinate their tanks, as Baer observed for himself:

*"Time and again we were perplexed at the haphazard manner of their attack... They always came in little spurts, 30 to 40 tanks at a time, once from the front, once from the left or from the right. One attack after another was shot to pieces – often in close combat, which saw the infantry destroying many tanks using magnetic charges."*

*"On the 12th we first warded off an attack of 30 to 40 tanks east of the railway. As usual, the enemy suffered heavily. However, throughout that day, particularly fierce engagements were fought*

*west of the railway where Tigers had been deployed. For this reason we were set to counter-attack to the west of the railway towards Mikhailovka as the day went on. We fought throughout the entire day, as the enemy was attacking from Prokhorovka, but also along the flanks, from the Yamki area on the right and the Mikhailovka area on the left. We held our positions on that day and did not retreat."*

### **New aircraft types fought in the air**

The Soviets were aware of their own shortcomings. In one report, an officer lamented the lack of cooperation and coordination:

*"In the first two days of fighting, one notes a lack of operational interaction, reconnaissance and coordination among the corps. Basic shortcomings pointed out by the operational▶▶*



*Despite huge losses, the Soviets gain ground as the day progresses. Their numbers – men and tanks – are simply too overwhelming for the Germans.*



# German tanks were lured into death traps

The panzer divisions met more than just superior numbers in the form of Soviet T-34 tanks. Everywhere around Kursk, the battlefield was littered with the Red Army's ingenious defences of minefields, anti-tank ditches, trenches and strategic vantage points where the Soviet troops could lie in ambush. Therefore, even when the Germans had defeated the enemy tanks and thought they could finally speed up the advance, each attack extracted heavy casualties.

## THE TRAP

With a carefully planned obstacle course of minefields, deep trenches and natural barriers such as lakes, the Red Army forced the Germans into their death traps – like a funnel. The 'funnel' narrowed in on a spot where the Soviets had a good view, making the German tanks particularly vulnerable.

## AMBUSH

Hidden behind strategic ridges, Soviet tanks, soldiers and mobile artillery waited to strike back.





### LOOKOUTS

In preparation for the attack, the Red Army had built a 175-kilometre-wide defensive wall consisting of six heavily fortified defensive lines including 5,000 km of new trenches. Protected underground, Soviet soldiers could easily move between positions. Lookouts kept an eye on the enemy and could radio to attack.

### MINES

Over 503,000 anti-tank mines were laid in the grain and sunflower fields along the front at Kursk. The minefields led the enemy into the death trap.

### MORTAR POSITION

From trenches, specially trained Soviet soldiers aimed 20,000 mortars and guns at the panzer divisions.

### ANTI-TANK GUNS

On command, the first soldiers fired anti-tank shots from a good vantage point at the German tanks in the death trap. The attack acted as a starting signal for all other Soviet units to launch their hellish bombardment on the Germans.



## FACTS

The Red Army sent a total of almost

**700**

tanks into the battle.

The Germans had 294 vehicles still capable of fighting.

section of the army staff are the absence of artillery interaction with the 95th Guards Rifle Division. The units did not arrive on time at their jump-off positions. Regimental commanders did not understand their orders sufficiently. For example, Lieutenant Colonel Seletskii and Major Kakmovtsev were called to divisional headquarters at 08.00 in order to receive their instructions, when the battle had already begun.”

As chaos reigned across the plains, a battle also raged in the clouds above. Whoever controlled the airspace would have free rein to bomb enemy tanks and positions, and both the Luftwaffe and Red Army Air Forces refused to back down. In the air battle, two brand new types of aircraft took part in some of their first battles: the German Focke-Wulf 190 and the Soviet Yak-9 fighter. The aircraft were the two air forces’ new trump cards, but were so visually similar that the pilots involved often struggled to determine if they were facing friend or foe. This confusion almost cost German pilot Günther Rall his life:

“On 12th July I went up for a free chase with my adjutant late in the afternoon. The sun stood in the west, a humongous cumulus cloud rose up in the east, which was drenched in glowing red sunlight. We flew at an altitude of around 4,500 metres so that I did not notice what went on in terms of intense fighting on the ground that day.

“I then noticed two dots in the front of the glowing red cloud. We attacked immediately, the sun in our rear. Upon approaching I became unsure whether

these were really enemy planes or whether they could be two of the newly commissioned Fw-190 chase planes. I was aware that a squadron with that new type had been sent to the front for Citadel, but I had never seen this airplane before. So I pulled up just before the other airplanes ... and that is where I saw the red star on the wing.

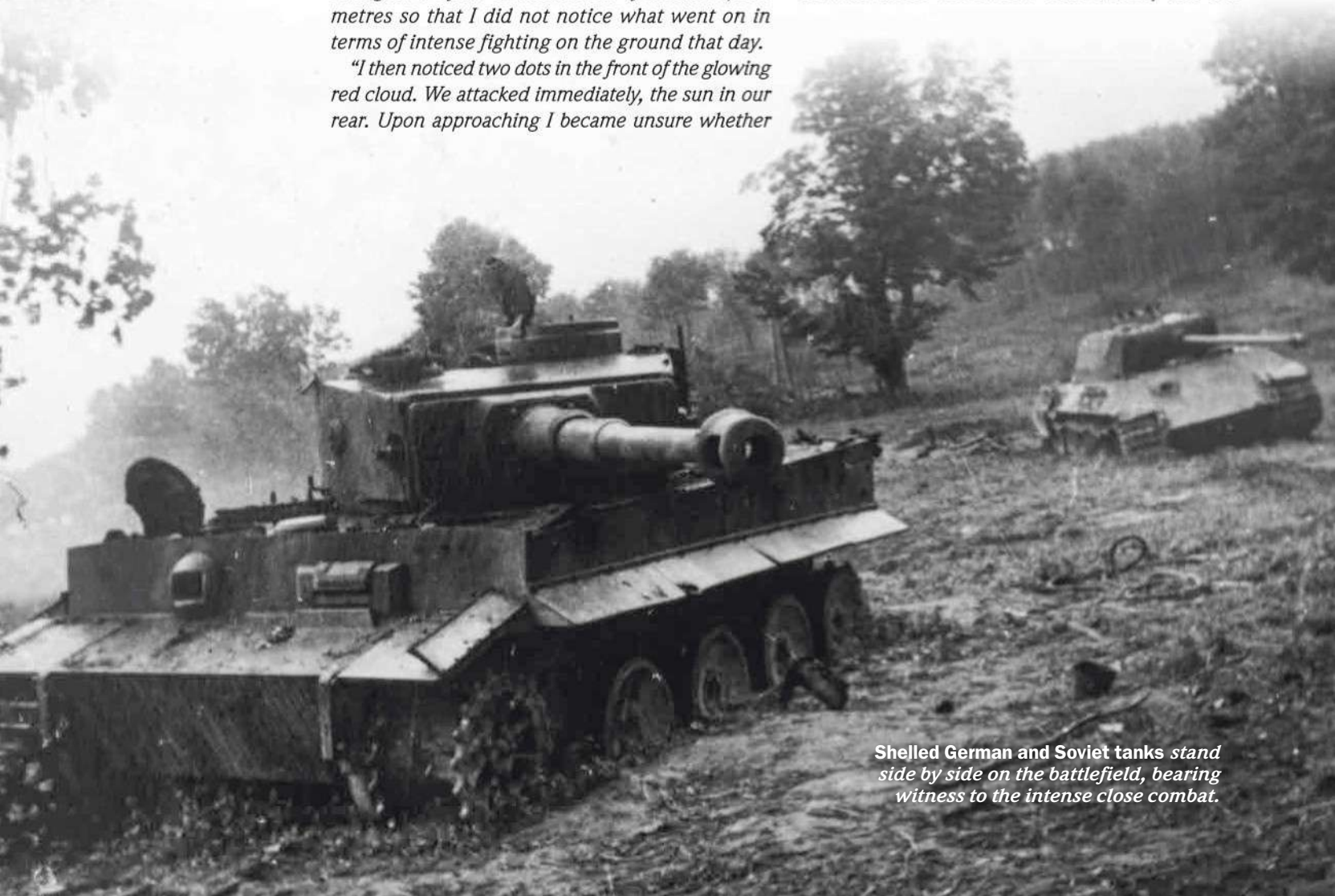
“I immediately commenced the attack, and – coming from the side – I flew directly towards one of the enemy airplanes. Then occurred what is termed a ‘mid-air collision’. While my propeller cut off the enemy’s wing, his propeller slit my plane open from underneath. The enemy plane fell out of the sky, while I was able to retain lift.”

But Rall’s plane was too badly damaged to continue in the air much longer:

“The damaged propeller and the hull that was slit open were causing such severe vibrations, though, that I felt the engine would be torn out of the airplane any minute. But I managed to get behind my own lines where I made another crash landing.”

## SS Division Adolf Hitler defended itself

Meanwhile, the Soviet XVIII Tank Corps along with the rest of the 5th Guards Tank Army continued to advance across the narrow front directly into the



Shelled German and Soviet tanks stand side by side on the battlefield, bearing witness to the intense close combat.



German defensive positions along the hills south of Prokhorovka and west of the railway. Here SS Division Adolf Hitler had taken up a perfect defensive position from which the elite corps could fire on the attackers from three sides, while German artillery observers enjoyed a clear view of the battlefield for calling in artillery and air support where necessary. In its report, the tank corps summed up the difficulties in defeating the position:

*"Lacking necessary support from our fighter aviation and suffering heavy casualties from enemy artillery fire and bombing... The terrain in the corps' attack zone is cut by three deep ravines ... which is why the 181st and 170th Tank Brigades, advancing in the first echelon, were forced to attack on the corps' left flank. The 170th Tank Brigade, attacking on the left flank, by 12.00 had lost 60% of its equipment. Despite these losses, overcoming the enemy's fire resistance, the corps units took the Oktyabrskii Sovkhoz."*

The Germans couldn't help but admire the Red Army's determination to fight on despite its huge losses. Officer Cadet Kendziora, aboard a Tiger tank, noted the Soviets' willingness for sacrifice:

*"I recall one example which I witnessed myself. One T-34 sat ablaze roughly a thousand feet from our positions. The crew had bailed out. I then noticed how an apparently wounded soldier dragged himself back to the burning tank, got in, and then drove the tank against one of ours. I think the latter was an armoured personnel carrier. The Soviet tank exploded upon impact. This is a prime example of the doggedness Soviet soldiers showed in combat. They obviously wanted to beat us right there on that battlefield. However, we held the ground against high numerical superiority, on this day and the following days."*

### Germans destroyed 416 tanks

Despite the huge losses on 12th July, the battles resumed the next day. Both Soviet and German units attacked and counter-attacked each other. German casualties on 12th July were high, with 122 tanks destroyed, but they paled next to the Soviets, who lost 416 tanks and thousands of soldiers. Wherever you looked, the battlefield remained shrouded in smoke from tanks still burning from the day before, and soldiers on both sides felt their stomachs turn as the stench of dead bodies rotting in the summer heat crept across the battlefield.

But during the fighting on 13th July, there were still some dribs and drabs of humanity following the previous day's slaughter. German officer Dr Weinberger noted one such example in his diary:

*"13th July. At the medical detachment. Two ambulance drivers approached me in an excited mood and reported: 'What happened to us today▶*

NEWS FROM THE FRONT:



# Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph

Saturday 10th July 1943

## Sicily invaded. Allied armies storm island. "Beginning of end" – Roosevelt

**Fighting rages as Yanks land by sea and air.**

American, British and Canadian armies today invaded Sicily and, with warplanes and warships in support, battled through coastal minefields, barbed wire and gun emplacements to consolidate bridgeheads for the second front in Europe.

The invasion was preceded by a gigantic aerial blow by more than 100 American Liberator bombers from the Middle East, which smashed the general headquarters and "nerve centre of the Axis defence forces" at Taormina.

Then Allied forces under the command of General Dwight D Eisenhower struck from landing barges at night, opening the big push they had awaited since they cleared North Africa of the Axis two months ago. American and British warships formed the

invasion spearhead. Swarms of Allied bombers, fighter-bombers and fighters – engaged only yesterday in the final massive blows of aerial offensive that had rocked Sicilian targets for weeks – roared across the Mediterranean narrows at dawn and formed an aerial umbrella for the fighting men on the ground.

(Axis broadcasts said the Allies, spearheaded by parachute units and strongly supported by sea and air, landed on both southern and eastern coasts of the bomb-battered island, which is a segment of Metropolitan Italy. The Italian High Command said, "Axis armed forces are counter-attacking.")

(A German dispatch implied that the invasion was mounted from Malta and Pantelleria, saying the heaviest Allied concentrations between Gibraltar and Cyprus had [been] observed at those islands in the Sicilian straits.)

**On 9th July 1943, the Allies invaded Sicily, opening a new front for the Germans. Hitler responded immediately by withdrawing forces from Kursk to Italy.**

## Allied Armies Storm Island 'Beginning of End'--Roosevelt



**U.S. Guns Smashing AtMunda**

**France's Freedom Pledged**

**48 IN M'KEESPORT OVERCOME AT FIRE**

**British Fighters See Big Losses**

**London Calling Europe: 'Stand by for New'**

**Fighting Rages As Yanks Land By Sea and A**

**ALLIED HEADQUARTERS NORTH AFRICA, JUL 10 (AP) —**

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# ...Abandoned Operation Citadel

The Allied invasion of Italy in July 1943 forced Hitler to move troops quickly from the Eastern Front to *Lo Stivale* (Italian Boot) to counter the Allied threat from the south and shore up his old friend Benito Mussolini.

**O**n the evening of 13th July, the leaders of the two German fronts, Erich von Manstein and Günther von Kluge, met Adolf Hitler at his headquarters in Eastern Europe. The mood was sombre, because four days earlier Allied troops had landed in Sicily and opened a new front in Europe.

Hitler noted that Sicily would soon fall, and that the Western Allies' next objective would be a landing either on the Italian mainland or

in the Balkans. In either case, the invasion threatened the German war effort. The Führer had little confidence that his Italian allies would hold out for long without reinforcements in the form of battle-hardened German troops. Therefore, the establishment of new armies in Italy and the Balkan Peninsula was given top priority. The decision meant that the Germans were forced to remove troops from the Eastern Front, and more specifically that the Kursk

offensive now had to be brought to a halt. Historians have since pointed out that Hitler saw the situation in Italy as an excuse to stop an offensive that had already stalled, but that he lacked arguments with von Manstein, who wanted to continue the Battle of Kursk. The situation in Italy gave Hitler an excuse to overrule the general. When Mussolini was deposed shortly afterwards, Hitler had another reason to come to Italy's aid.



**Benito Mussolini was deposed two weeks after the Allied landings in Sicily. Italy's new regime posed a threat to Hitler.**



*may not sound true, but it really happened. After we passed that little ford, you know where the burnt-out T-34 tank is, we got hopelessly stuck in the soft earth with our wounded soldiers. We were unable to move, even though we rocked the truck back and forth. Then the unthinkable happened. The advancing Russians, who had been right on our tail all along, came running up to us. But they didn't shoot! Instead, they pushed our ambulance so that we were able to get it out of the mud – and here we are!"*

This surviving spark of humanity didn't stop the fighting, and thousands continued to die in the days following before the Battle of Kursk finally fizzled out for reasons other than the enormous casualties.

On the evening of 13th July, Field Marshals Erich von Manstein (Army Group South) and Günther von Kluge (Army Group Centre) were both summoned to Hitler's headquarters in East Prussia to discuss the future of the German campaign in Kursk. It was clear that the German units in the north under von Kluge couldn't sustain their attack, but should instead prepare a defence against the huge Soviet counter-offensive the Germans had realised was being established.

Von Manstein was permitted to continue a limited offensive in the south to destroy the remaining Red Army armoured forces in the area, in the hope that this would prevent a large-scale Soviet counter-offensive across a broad front. But there was no longer any question of reaching Kursk, Hitler decreed. The enemy's forces were simply too strong in the area, and at the same time the army needed the large German forces transferred elsewhere.

Overall, however, the Germans remained optimistic. During the first weeks of July, more than 200,000 German soldiers had lost their lives and over 750 tanks and self-propelled guns had been destroyed. Huge losses, yes, but nothing compared to the Soviets, who'd suffered over 850,000 dead alongside the loss of 6,000 tanks and self-propelled guns. Nevertheless, the Germans were now finding it increasingly difficult to replace their dead with new recruits, while the Soviets seemed to have endless reserves to draw on. Germany's last major offensive on the Eastern Front had been halted. At the same time, it soon became clear that many of the German tanks initially declared salvageable would have to be abandoned as the logistics troops were unable to drag them back to the front-line workshops. The new super-heavy Elephant tanks could not be pulled free by the usual rescue vehicles, while similar problems afflicted both Tiger and Panther tanks, forcing the Germans to leave the precious vehicles on the battlefield after being blown up by their crews to prevent them falling into Red

Army hands. Soviet General Vatutin, commanding the Voronezh Front at Kursk, noted in his report:

*"The main enemy force, as a result of these battles, was utterly bled white and routed. On 13th July, the enemy carried out weak attacks on the Prokhorovka, Oboyan and Ivnya axes... However, it was already clear that he had run out of steam against Kryuchenkin as well, and that his strength was at an end."*

It was time for the Germans to feel the full force of the Red Army and the revenge of the Soviet Union. ■



**Hundreds of German soldiers killed at Kursk were posthumously awarded the Iron Cross at ceremonies in their homeland.**



From the WWII Veterans History Project

## “If you didn’t get killed, you were lucky”

Wolfgang Kloth served first as a private and later as an officer in the German tank divisions. During the fighting at Kursk, he saw the Soviet defensive forces in action on the northern front and witnessed first-hand the German panic when the Red Army launched its counter-offensive.

**Herr Kloth, can you tell us how you joined the German panzer divisions?**

*I chose tanks. If you were a volunteer, instead of spending six months in the werke organisation [Nazi work service, in which all recruits were put to work], you spent only three months there. So, I went to the werke organisation from autumn 1941 to December, and I was in Jarocin, which is part of Poland today. I drove home for two weeks' vacation, then received my draft notice and I went to Mödling, a suburb of Vienna, where I had basic training with the Panzer I.*

*If you see a picture of it, it's laughable. It was a two-man tank but with no turret on it. But we had a good time driving these things around the countryside. It was playing around, you know. It was basic infantry training. You learned about the rifle and about the pistol and how to make your bed. All this garbage didn't make very much difference later on.*

**You became an officer. How did that happen?**

*I went from there to the Eastern Front, to Army Group Central. I was in a Panzer III. The German Army was looking for people who might make officers, so they asked me. And then they took me out of the front and moved me to a place called Wündsdorf – that's a suburb of Berlin. It had a big*



**WOLFGANG KLOTH (1923-)**

Wolfgang Kloth enlisted in the German Army in 1941 and chose to join the tank forces. Kloth took part in the Battle of Kursk as part of Germany's 2nd Panzer Division. When the war was over, he ended up in a Soviet prison camp until 1948. In 1951, Kloth emigrated to the United States, where he lives today.





tank school where all the people of the panzer forces underwent officers' training for three months. That was in 1942. In spring 1943, I went back to the front and that was the time of the Kursk offensive.

**What was it like to go suddenly from training to real combat? ?**

*You went to the front – all the noise and everything. You were really kinda scared. You had been in a panzer but you'd never had any hard experience in a panzer. You had to get used to the tank functions as a crew. Everybody had a specific function. You had to learn what to do and not to do. It was an interesting learning experience. If you didn't get killed you were lucky.*

**Did you get training in all the different roles during your time at tank school?**

*I learned how to basically drive a tank but didn't drive the real thing. I learned the functions of the radio operator but I never had that position. I had only three positions in a tank: gunner, loader and commander. I had only two battle days as loader. Battle days were only counted when you were behind enemy lines in a tank. If you had enough battle days, you were either lucky or dead.*

*The tanks I served in were really, really different tanks. The Panzer III was more moveable. It moved faster. The horsepower-to-weight ratio was better in the Panzer III than in the Panzer IV. In addition, it was shorter, so there wasn't as much room as in the Panzer IV. The real shitty thing was the driver and radio man didn't have any openings. They had to come out through the turret. I liked the Panzer III but its guns were not long enough – you couldn't shoot far enough. So, I was glad the first time I got back out there in a Panzer IV. It was an improvement.*

**Your own tanks were one thing, those of the Soviets were another. What were the enemy tanks like compared to yours?**

*Very good! When they were starting out, they only had a short 76.2-mm gun. Then they came around with this thing that we called the T-34 with a long "wach boom". (We called the long Soviet gun the "wach boom" because you heard "wach boom" before the shot hit you.) That was a very dangerous tank. The only advantage we had was the Russians had no communication between*



**Kloth on his way to the front in 1942. Shortly after, the 19-year-old soldier was thrown into the war on the Eastern Front.**

*their tanks. Absolutely helpless. But they were very good at going places where we wouldn't dare go because their kilogram-per-square-inch track ratio was a heck of a lot better than ours. Their footprint was a lot faster. In addition, you learned that the Russians would always show up where no one thought they could go.*

**What was your view of the Red Army's infantry during the war after fighting them for three years, from 1942 to 1945?**

*The Soviet infantry was always doing what they were told. They were shot if they didn't do the right thing. Their form of discipline was very foreign to the American and German systems. A life was nothing. In the German Army, people were considered an asset. In the Russian Army, it didn't make any difference how many people died, or why they died.*

*They were an efficient army. They did a good job fighting. However, if they collapsed, they collapsed totally. But as long as they kept fighting, they were a very good force. In the end, they were a successful army, no question. And besides, there were lots of them! In Germany, they say: "Too many dogs are the death of even the smartest rabbit."*

*They had a very strange system in their relations between officers and men. In the German Army, if a lieutenant came and you were a soldier (an enlisted man), you had to do what the lieutenant said. In the Russian Army, if a lieutenant came and you as a soldier were not in that lieutenant's company, you didn't do what ▶*



he told you. So that led to very strange relations and they had problems with that.

#### **How long were you in Kursk?**

At Kursk, it was four days. And it wasn't much fun. The Germans faced, for the first time, huge numbers of T-34s dug in – up to the turret. And that's a bad deal – very bad. Number one, they are hard to see. Number two, they are hard to hit. And number three, they had already predetermined the distances to targets: "You know that they have to come through there, over that hill is 1,500 metres and over there is 1,200." They were way in the advantage, way in the advantage. That was a sad affair. We really took a beating.

We were in the northern section of the bulge. Right after we had a little bit of success, they broke through way to the north of us. We had a three-day road trip in retreat. It's murder. You're glad to stop after only a couple of miles. Imagine! We were driving day and night. I was surprised they got us the gasoline. We killed quite a few of our own. It's terrible because in a retreat a lot of

people died from friendly fire because you didn't know where they were. You were shooting at the Russians coming at us; after the Russians disappeared, all of a sudden came the next wave. We didn't realise they weren't Russians – they were Germans. A lot of people got killed that way. Then I got wounded and was out of it.

#### **At Kursk, the Soviets had dug positions with a great many anti-tank guns. What was that like?**

If you're faced with AT [anti-tank] guns, it's always a question of who sees whom first and who shoots first. In many cases, the intelligence of the commanding officer of the vehicle, to describe where the target is because the gunner can't see the target, made the difference. As the commander, you have to get the gunner to see what you want him to shoot at. You didn't pay any attention to artillery because, unless you got hit

**Kloth was wounded four times, but does not consider himself a hero. Instead, he refers to himself as a lucky survivor.**

**Wolfgang Kloth**





**In the German Army, people were considered an asset. In the Russian Army, it didn't make any difference how many people died.**

*directly, it exploded someplace – it made some noise outside but you didn't pay any attention to that. Same thing with mortars. You're inside your tank and your hatch is shut. A mortar wouldn't hurt a tank.*

**What do you remember most about the fighting and the war?**

*Well, the bad thing is that the bad parts of your memory stay and the good experiences are forgotten. We had some very bad experiences where sometimes we didn't think fast enough and it cost a lot of lives. The Russians were masters at digging trenches and making foxholes.*

*The Germans said: "You had to have a mound in front where you can lay your rifle on it." From a hundred yards away, you could see where it was!*

*The Russians: you saw just a little dark spot and when you got there, there was a hole and the Russian could stand in it! In many cases, like during rain, you didn't see the hole. That surprised us, especially in the later years when the Russians used anti-tank rifles. They were very high quality. And a very high penetration. There are a lot of places on a tank that an anti-tank rifle could shoot right through.*

*They fought a different war. They had a large sack, like a large grocery sack on their back, and a bottle of water and five potatoes, and they lived on that for five days. The Germans would get all upset if they didn't get any food. And the Americans would get more upset if they didn't get any food.*

*An army can be described as a triangle where the top is the fighting soldier and the bottom is the people who support that soldier at the front. While the Germans were like an equilateral triangle, the Russians were a very thin, steep triangle. Very few people were needed to keep a Russian soldier alive and fighting.*

**You've said that skill meant nothing, but luck was the deciding factor for everyone...**

*The best things you can have are dumb luck and dry martinis! You ask: why didn't that happen to me? Why am I here and not under the ground? Sometimes luck is so obvious! Once I took a long-range shot – I don't know where it came from or what it was. I was in a Panzer IV and*



**With the annexation of Austria in 1938, the 2nd Panzer Division was moved to the mountains and given the Austrian double-headed eagle as its emblem. The photo is Wolfgang Kloth's own of his tank on the Eastern Front.**

*a solid shot dropped down between the driver's hatch and the radio man's hatch. It killed the driver. It killed the radio man. But we got out. That was it.*

*I became a prisoner of war in Russia in 1945. The Russians divided the labour force into four categories. One would be the very muscular ones. A different workload would be assigned to each category. So if you were in category one and he was in category two, you would have to shovel more sand than he did.*

*To determine your category, you paraded naked in front of them and they pinched you in the ass. They checked how big your gluteus maximus was. I was born with almost none. I was in very good physical condition but I don't have a butt! So, I was always category three, which put me way ahead of everyone else when it came to workload. You talk about dumb luck, that's dumb luck.*

**Can you talk about the circumstances of your capture?**

*I wasn't captured. I surrendered. The war was over. We lined our guns up and the Russians came. We threw our weapons away and marched – became prisoners. You know, this is a very unpleasant thing. All the time you were so concerned to just stay alive. You can't even imagine that. From one day to the next. You knew that the country was defeated and that no one gave a damn about you. For two years, my parents didn't even know if I was alive. So, it's a very strange circumstance. The Russians weren't really a friendly people. ■*





For seven days, the Soviets had doggedly defended themselves. Now the German front lines were weakened and ready to be taken.



Eastern Front, July 1943

# SOVIETS GO ON THE OFFENSIVE

The poor infantrymen  
were left at the front  
with nothing but their  
field rifles.

Lieutenant Franz-Joachim von Rodde of the retreating  
6th Panzer Regiment, which left German soldiers to die.



# Soviets go on the offensive

**By mid-July 1943, it was clear that the German offensive against Kursk had stalled. For days, the Soviets had suffered horrific losses, but it was time to strike back. Millions of soldiers were ready to attack. Having only been successful during winter so far, the Red Army had to prove it could also be victorious in summer.**

By Benjamin Alkaersig Christensen

**P**anicking, the 156th Pioneer Battalion's lookout yelled, "Ivan is already behind us to the left ... he's coming!" The sentry was helping to hold the northern front at Orel, north of Kursk. For days, it had been relatively quiet along this front, but throughout the morning of 13th July, Soviet shells had been raining down on the German positions. How the Soviets had the strength to attack after a week of brutal fighting was beyond comprehension, but the reality was that the German soldiers on the northern front were now facing the dreaded Soviet attack.

The distinctive Russian cry of "*Urrah!*" roared across the plain as hundreds of infantrymen came charging towards the German positions, followed by a mass of T-34 tanks.

*"Göke, Zeller, Huppertz: come with me. Winkel and Bergmann: give covering fire," ordered Sergeant Jackart, as mortar shells exploded around the German defensive positions. One of the Germans grabbed two anti-tank mines, while Jackart stuffed his belt full of hand grenades.*

*"We're going for the two tanks rolling through on the left. Winkel: watch out for any Ivans trying to cut us off!" the sergeant ordered.*

Crawling through the trenches, the two soldiers reached the first T-34. Suddenly, an ear-splitting roar, a shower of sparks and a shockwave filled the air, knocking the two men to the ground as the tank fired its gun right over their heads.

*"Get moving," Jackart shouted as the two men struggled to their feet and leapt towards the tank. A group of Soviet infantrymen advanced on the Germans, but a hand grenade from Jackart and a volley from Winkel and Bergmann's machine guns kept them at bay.*

With a few quick steps, Göke reached the tank, put his anti-tank grenade on the back of the Soviet vehicle and pulled out the small pin screwed into the weapon.

*"It's going to blow!"* the German soldier managed to shout as he scrambled to safety, seconds before a gigantic bang and a metallic clang enveloped everything. When the two Germans looked up, the T-34 was still standing, but without its gun turret, which had been blown completely off. Despite the success, the battle had only just begun. Several Soviet tanks and hundreds of infantrymen were heading towards the small group of Germans. What they

experienced on 13th July 1943 was the start of the first Soviet summer offensive of World War II. While the Germans exhausted themselves in the Kursk foothills, several Soviet armies were preparing to advance across the entire 2,000-kilometre front line. The Germans at Kursk would face the full force of the Steppe Front in the coming weeks, but the weakened German defensive lines to the north and south also had to be broken. Some of the armoured divisions were on their way to Italy, the Luftwaffe was exhausted after the fighting over Kursk, and the Germans' new tanks had already been destroyed or disabled after the enormous Battle of Prokhorovka. The timing was perfect for the Soviets, and the Germans had once again fallen into a trap.

It therefore came as no surprise to the military high command in Moscow when, on 12th July, a message ticked in from Kursk:

*"The troops of the Central Front, who have opposed the enemy with a wall of deadly steel, Russian steadfastness and toughness, have worn the enemy down in eight days of ceaseless, bitter fighting and brought his assault to a standstill. The first stage of the battle has ended." The next stage could now begin.*

## **A million Soviets were ready to attack**

On a front that stretched for hundreds of kilometres north of the Kursk battlefield, 1,280,000 Soviet troops and more than 2,400 tanks and self-propelled guns stood ready to launch a counter-attack against General Walter Model's 9th Army and 2nd Panzer Army, which suddenly found themselves in serious peril. His troops stood in a small protrusion on the front – a 200-kilometre-wide and 160-kilometre-deep bulge stretching into the Soviet lines at the town of Orel. The small pocket's northern front was lightly manned because all units had headed south to attack Kursk. Apart from two reserve divisions, almost no German units north of the town of Orel stood ready to stop an assault. As the Soviet hammer struck, the German front lines were overrun by hordes of Red Army infantry and tanks in less than two hours. And suddenly the Germans were in danger of being surrounded and captured.

Heinrich Schneider and his small artillery unit, previously positioned well behind the front line, suddenly found themselves in the thick of the



battle. Soviet T-34 tanks were rumbling towards them at full speed. “Now!” shouted Schneider, but Oberleutnant Johannes Störl shook his head. He wanted to wait until all four guns in the battery were ready – only a perfect response could save the Germans now. A few seconds later, the order to fire was given. Four shells roared into the air. Two of them hit their targets, and another volley destroyed a third Soviet tank. But there were still 11 tanks left, which now opened fire on the German battery. As the Soviets closed in, all guns were firing. The German battery knocked out four more Soviet tanks, but seven continued their advance. The enemy numbers were overwhelming and Schneider only managed to jump aside at the last moment as a tank ran over his gun.

From there, the German soldier could see the Soviets continue through the German gun position towards the next German lines. The group hurriedly laid anti-tank mines around their position, just in time to stop the next wave of Red Army tanks. Colonel General Lothar Rendulic with his XXXV Corps also experienced the Soviet surge:

*“In the afternoon 200 tanks rolled over our second line of resistance and advanced into the interior, where they were engaged by our anti-tank guns and a number of artillery batteries. The tanks overran several anti-tank gun positions. Three tanks attempted to destroy one of our batteries, but two of them ran over mines in the barbed-wire entanglements and exploded. From then on, Russian tanks no longer tried to overrun batteries protected by wire obstacles.”*

### **Germans needed every last man**

Against all odds, during the day the Germans managed to temporarily halt the Soviet offensive along a series of fortified hills around the town of Orel. But the situation was critical and the commander of the German forces in the area, Colonel General Rendulic, was concerned about the next day:

*“I had already been forced to commit half of the available reserves on the first day. We learned from prisoners that the enemy had more than 1,400 tanks available.”*

**Scorched earth tactics.**  
*The Germans followed the Soviets' lead and burned everything that could be used by the Red Army. Even the smallest villages were in flames when the Soviets arrived.*





**That was my baptism of fire. This was no longer training, it was war.** ■ Soviet Sub-Lieutenant Evgeni Bessonov on his first battle near Orel.

The commander of the northern front, General Model, soon realised that something had to be done if both German armies in the area were not to be surrounded and wiped out. In one of his daily orders, the general described how the Red Army was attacking all along the front around the Orel pocket and decisive battles lay ahead. At that point, he personally took command of the 2nd Panzer Army.

The situation was hopeless for the Germans. Although the troops inflicted heavy losses on the enemy, fresh Soviet soldiers continued to arrive at the front at Orel. In many cases, the reinforcements were recruits fresh from training. The newly trained units were energetic and enthusiastic, but lacked combat experience and often even weapons. Such as young Evgeni Bessonov, who had recently been appointed sub-lieutenant but had never seen combat himself. Now his unit faced one of the fortified hills.

*"At dawn the company formed a line and, together with two other companies of the battalion, walked with a rapid step towards the hill, having no idea if the enemy was defending it,"* Bessonov later recalled. *"That was my baptism of fire. This was no longer training, it was war, and*

*the enemy was in front of us. The enemy first opened up with machine-gun fire from the hill and then launched a concentrated mortar barrage on us. Just as I had in training, I ordered the soldiers: 'Forward run,' and ran forward myself – just as I had in training. All of a sudden, my soldiers were no longer in front of me. I heard voices from the side, from a ravine, where the soldiers from the company and from my platoon had already taken cover.*

*"They started to dig in. I did not even have an entrenching tool, let alone weapons – neither a pistol nor a sub-machine gun; I only received weapons a couple of days later."*

Bessonov and his men waited until nightfall. Then they were ordered to make a night assault on the hill, where the Germans were well entrenched.

*"A night assault is a special type of combat, it is complicated and requires the close cooperation of all battalion units, even between the individual soldiers of the company; it also requires bravery and fearlessness. The assault began well until we reached a barbed-wire entanglement and the company had to lie down in front of it. How*

**The Red Army would trap the Germans in the same way as at Stalingrad. Two armies would surround Model's northern forces.**







# The Auckland Star

London 5th August 1943

## Belgorod falls to Russian Army

The Russian Army today captured the important town of Belgorod, 86 miles south-east of Kursk. Marshal Stalin announced the capture of Orel and Belgorod in an Order of the Day. He said the victories would be celebrated in Moscow by the firing of 12 salvoes from 120 guns. The entire German defence system around the Orel bulge is crumbling swiftly, following the fall of Orel itself, according to the Moscow military spokesman. The Moscow correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* says the fleeing German garrison aims to escape from Orel with as many men as possible to the temporary shelter of Bryansk. Russians, sweeping from the north and south, are trying to cut them off and close the pincers at Karachev, 25 miles east of Bryansk. The fate of between 150,000 and 200,000 Germans is being decided in the forests along the tracks west of Orel. The Russians are certain to gain enormous booty and masses of artillery and tanks. The Soviet newspaper *Pravda* says thousands of German dead and mountains of

scrap iron litter the battlefield in the wake of the Germans.

The Russians have launched a new drive, threatening Bryansk, the German's next hedgehog city, states the Russian correspondent of the *Daily Express*. Other Russian forces are mopping up Orel, where the German rearguards are fighting stubbornly in the streets. The Germans are attempting to slow the Russians west of Orel, keeping up a ceaseless barrage. In his Order of the Day to the generals commanding the forces on the Orel front announcing the capture of Orel and Belgorod, Stalin said: "The Germans on 5th July began their summer offensive from Orel and Belgorod to encircle and wipe out our troops in the Kursk salient and occupy Kursk. Our troops, having repulsed all enemy attempts to break through to Kursk, went over to the offensive and occupied Orel and Belgorod exactly one month after the Germans began their offensive. The Russians have again dispelled the German legend that the Russians are unable to wage a summer offensive."

could we overcome the obstacle? We did not have wirecutters."

After discussing the situation with the other two platoon leaders and the company commander, they made a decision.

*"We all decided to withdraw to our starting positions. We reported that we had failed to complete the mission and received a repeated order to seize the enemy's trench."*

Several of the new recruits now realised that the fighting at the front was far more dangerous than they had been told or had seen in the weekly newsreels. And not everyone could rally themselves when the Soviets attacked again at dawn.

*"I noticed that two Kazakh soldiers ... did not join the platoon during the assault and stayed in their foxhole. I warned them strictly that they could be severely punished for cowardice. Incidentally, during the daytime assault, my assistant platoon leader Sabaev also fell behind, saying that he had stomach ache. That was the only time in my life when I told another person: 'If this happens again, I'll shoot you.' Sabaev got the message, and in the second night assault, I ordered him to check the foxholes, see if anyone had stayed behind and then join the assaulting line with those that he found. He fulfilled the order and no longer had stomach ache."*

### Grenades roared through darkness

Bessonov and his unit continued to pound the German positions on the hill without success. First, they tried another night assault.

*"The second assault was also unsuccessful. However, the Germans only spotted us when we got right under the entanglement. They tossed hand grenades at us and opened machine-gun fire. A hand grenade went off next to me, but in the heat of the battle, I did not pay attention to it," Bessonov remembered.*

*"My garrison cap was torn and I found out that I was wounded in my head by grenade splinters. Sabaev bandaged my head."*

The fighting didn't go much better in daylight.

*"With the support of three T-34 tanks, we again assaulted the enemy's trench and were again thrown back. The tanks were knocked out because of the failure of the crews: they had abandoned the tanks before they were knocked out and so the tanks kept on rolling empty towards the enemy. This really happened, I ▶*

By August it was clear that the Germans were heading for a costly defeat. Media analysis was to prove correct.





*did not make it up and I never again saw such a shameful episode in the whole war."*

Over the next few nights, Bessonov and his men attacked twice more without success, the fighting typical of both the desperate German defensive struggle along the front line and the insistent and endless offensive of the Soviets. For Bessonov, the attacks were a failure.

*"I should say that the 2nd and 3rd battalions of the brigade also failed to advance during their attacks; their attacks were repelled with heavy losses in personnel. The enemy firmly held on to the dominant hill."*

## Infantry stormed tanks

But there were also Soviet successes in mid-July. In several places, Soviet tanks managed to break through the German lines. Soldiers in the German 192nd Grenadier Regiment could hear the familiar hum of Soviet T-34 tanks and the rattle of their caterpillar tracks. The soldiers in front began to fall back as the regiment's colonel observed the advancing tanks.

*"There are infantry on top of the tanks, Herr Oberst!"* shouted the regiment's adjutant among the chaos of the fighting.

*"Let them get closer and we'll open fire with the machine guns,"* the colonel calmly ordered.

Then the Soviet tanks started firing. Shells flew over the heads of the Germans and into the small village behind them. The Germans returned fire and the first of the Red Army's so-called tank riders were mowed down.

A small group of Germans armed with mines jumped out of their foxholes and charged towards the nearest tanks. With muffled explosions, they were knocked out one by one.

But the tanks kept rolling forward. One of them tried to bury a group of German soldiers in their trench by driving back and forth along the edge until the ground collapsed around the German grenadiers, who had to jump out of the way. ►

**The Steppe Front in action.** While the Germans' strength was dwindling, the Soviets were able to rearm thanks to an almost endless supply of new recruits.



The Soviet Order of the Red Star was widely distributed. It could be awarded to military personnel and civilians, as well as naval ships and factories.

In the army, the star was awarded for extraordinary courage in battle.



5 Aug

The Soviets repossess the entire territory taken by the Germans during the first days of the Kursk offensive.

13 Aug

The Soviet offensive gains momentum and the Germans are forced to retreat again and again. Kharkiv falls on 23rd August.

25 Sep

Despite fierce German resistance, large areas of land and towns – including Smolensk – fall to the Soviets.







**Hitler moves the 12th Panzer Corps from the northern to the southern front, where the armed forces will battle Soviet tanks in a defensive operation.**

*"Give me covering fire,"* ordered a German officer as he reached for a pile of anti-tank grenades. Immediately, the officer made his way up the trench as bullets whizzed around him. A bullet grazed his right leg, but the German continued towards the tank and reached it. He threw the grenades at the edge of the gun turret and activated the fuse. The ensuing explosion caused the turret to jam and the now-disabled tank to retreat. When the officer attempted to attack another group of Soviet tanks in the same way, he was mortally wounded. Although the Germans were outnumbered on the ground, they still had a slight advantage in the air. Soviet Bessonov and his men, who had never experienced air raids before, felt their effects when German bombers attacked:

*"That was my first experience of such a heavy air raid. It was pure hell; it is hard to find a comparison for it. You are just lying in your foxhole and waiting for death.*

*"Bombs are exploding all around, the ground is shaking and you are shaking. I was frightened to death and wanted to run away from that hell, but I was a commander and had to stay with my soldiers,"* Bessonov recalled.

*"One has to know how to overcome fear. There are no fearless men, fear is natural, but some people are able to overcome it; others shiver but remember their responsibilities and get over it. The third type of people grows numb with fear and they literally lose their minds. Such people run anywhere just to hide, creating panic among others."*

After several hours, the Germans' constant bombardment finally stopped.

*"The sun was setting and the enemy's air force ceased its air raids; the artillery and mortar fire had stopped even earlier. One by one, the soldiers started to crawl out of their foxholes. The ground*

*around our trenches was churned up with bomb craters, some foxholes collapsed and buried the soldiers who were in them."*

After the bombardment, the unit was allowed to retreat, but the battalion's commander was unhappy that they had not been able to capture enemy positions and had allowed themselves to be stopped by barbed wire.

*"There was no barbed wire entanglement. You just thought it up,"* Bessonov's superior shouted at all the NCOs.

*"The company commanders unanimously reported that there was an entanglement, but the battalion commander insisted on his version,"* Bessonov later wrote. Nevertheless, he escaped one of the feared Soviet punishments.

### **Germans destroyed everything**

Although the Germans put up a stiff resistance, the battle was lost and the Germans couldn't hold the Soviets back for ever. The German soldiers had been in continuous combat for almost two weeks and suffered from a desperate lack of everything, from military equipment to sleep, as Lieutenant General von Saucken later noted.

*"The uninterrupted commitment in extremely heavy fighting without sleep reduced the physical strength of the soldiers to a condition of acute exhaustion. A significant shortage of radio operators, particularly for the artillery, has made communications slower. The motor vehicle situation is strained to the limit, especially with regard to trucks. Uniforms and equipment are in a critical condition. In many instances, all of the personal belongings of some soldiers have been lost due to a total loss of motor vehicles,"* von Saucken wrote, adding that it was clear that the pocket could not be held.

On 25th July, the Germans slowly began to withdraw, fighting defensive battles all the way against the Red Army, which gradually advanced.

The landscape recaptured by the Soviet soldiers was scarred by war. In their retreat, the Germans destroyed anything of value to the Soviets. As Sub-Lieutenant Bessonov noted:

*"In an attempt to turn the area around Orel into a wilderness, the enemy burnt entire villages during his retreat, putting everything that he could to the torch. Just chimneys remained after the fire – a horrible, depressing view. Surviving civilians had to come back to those ashes. The Germans blew up railways and broke sleepers with a special machine, snapping them in two. From the black pillars of smoke that rose from the burning houses we knew that the Germans were about to retreat."*

After a month and six days of fighting, the Orel pocket was finally in Soviet hands on 18th August ►



# Neither the Germans nor the Soviets were satisfied with the result

Although the Germans were being driven back on all fronts and had lost enormous numbers of men and materiel, the Soviets were not satisfied. They'd hoped to surround the Germans at Kursk and put them out of action for good.

**T**he German summer offensive at Kursk was not the decisive success that Hitler and his General Staff had hoped for. General Heinz Guderian summed up the failure afterwards:

*"By the failure of Citadel we had suffered a decisive defeat. The armoured formations, reformed and re-equipped with so much effort, had lost heavily both in men and equipment and would now be unemployable for a long time to come. It was problematical whether they would be rehabilitated in time to defend the Eastern Front. Needless to say, the Russians exploited their victory to the full. There were to be no more periods of quiet on the Eastern Front. From now on the enemy was in undisputed possession of the initiative."*

Although the Germans acknowledged defeat, Soviet command was not completely satisfied with the outcome of the Kursk campaign. The Red Army had sacrificed hundreds of thousands of soldiers without achieving a crushing victory over the Germans on the scale of that won six months earlier at Stalingrad. Disappointingly, no German forces had been surrounded and destroyed, as the deputy commander of the Soviet military forces, Marshal Rokossovsky, later admitted:

*"Instead of encircling the enemy, we only pushed them out of the bulge. The operation would have been different if we had used*

*our force for two heavy punches which met at Bryansk."* Despite their dissatisfaction, the Soviets pushed the Germans back. And not only at Kursk. They were in retreat along most of the front in the late summer and autumn of 1943. Soviet units captured cities such as Smolensk and Roslavl in the north, while Kiev

and Kharkiv were recaptured in the south. Crucially, the Soviets established bridgeheads on the western side of the Dnieper, a good starting point for the next offensive in 1944.



**For Hitler, the late summer of 1943 was a disaster. He could see the front lines on the map moving closer and closer to Germany.**



My best friend, Victor Khomenko from Kharkiv, died. He was shooting directly at a German tank and set it on fire. ■ Soviet soldier Semen Govzman in a letter to his parents.

1943. The Germans had been pushed back, but both Nazi armies in the area had escaped being trapped.

### Southern front also fell

According to Soviet plans, the attack in the north was to be supported by a simultaneous attack in the south. The offensive began on 12th July with a huge armoured assault at Prokhorovka, but after massive losses on the first day and subsequent counter-attacks by German panzer forces, it would be a while before the southern part of the counter-attack could resume.

But with the news of the Soviet advance in the north in the latter half of July, it was time to resume the counter-attack in the south. As Colonel Ilya Markin explained after the war in the official Soviet account of the Battle of Kursk, the offensive in the north changed the situation around Kursk, making it clear to the Soviet forces in the south that the critical

moment in the area around Belgorod and Kursk had arrived.

The aim in the south was not only to push the Germans out of the Kursk pocket, but to make an aggressive push first against Belgorod and then the key Ukrainian city of Kharkiv, which had already changed hands three times during the war. On 18th July 1943, Semen Moiseyevich Govzman, a battery commander in an anti-tank regiment, sat down to write a letter home to his parents, who had fled Kharkiv when the Germans captured it. Now Semen and his unit were on their way to retake the city.

*"Dear Mother and Father, greetings from the front! Finally, I have my first evening off. For the past two weeks we were fighting to the south of Kursk. Our regiment destroyed about 50 German tanks, but we lost almost all our tanks. The infantry retreated often, so we would stay by ourselves against*

**Desperate Eastern Front veterans.** *Although more than three million German soldiers were fighting in the Soviet Union, they could no longer defend the vast territories they'd taken.*





*German tanks. We fought furiously and stopped the Germans.*

*"My best friend, Victor Khomenko from Kharkiv, died. He was shooting directly at a German tank and set it on fire. The burning tank managed to drive right over him. Our troops are being rearranged now. We are getting additional weapons and soldiers. Dear Mother and Father, it is a great victory. We'll get together again soon in our dear Kharkiv. Hugs and kisses – Semen."*

### **Zhukov knew every detail**

It was the young Soviet's last letter home to his family. Seven days later, Semen fell in the Soviet counter-attack on Kharkiv. The day he wrote his letter, Soviet units from the 95th Guards Field Division were building a bridge over the Psel River, which had to be crossed before the attack on Kharkiv could

begin. Suddenly, a visitor arrived. "All of a sudden a Willys [US-built jeep] drove to our observation point," recalled Major Valentin Viktorovich Snegirev.

*"I looked out and saw Marshal Zhukov stepping out of the car. I saw him for the first time in my life, but recognised him immediately because there were many of his photographs everywhere. [Colonel AN] Lyakhov, the division commander, also saw Zhukov. He jumped out of the trench and ran to him, and started reporting to him about the offensive being carried out by his division. Zhukov stopped him and asked about the crossing of the Psel River by the troops.*

*"Colonel Lyakhov told him about it and showed him the bridge. Zhukov looked at it carefully and then ordered an engineer battalion sent to the bridge to reinforce it and to put logs on the oozy northern bank. 'A lot of tanks will go over* ▶





# Stalin paid tribute to Soviet soldiers

On 24th July, the situation at Kursk was so stable that Stalin dared to declare victory over the Germans. The Soviet leader therefore used his order of the day to honour the heroic troops of the Red Army.

**O**ptimism reigned in Moscow two and a half weeks after the German attack. The enemy had been slowed down and Germany's losses were enormous, especially compared to those of the Soviet Union. Soviet troops were in good spirits, Stalin noted when he issued a proud order of the day on 24th July. The dictator could finally smell victory.

Moscow, 24th July 1943

Yesterday, on 23rd July, as the result of the successful operations of our troops, the complete liquidation of the German July offensive was accomplished in the areas south of Orel and north of Belgorod in the direction of Kursk.

On the morning of 5th July, the German-Fascist troops, with large forces of tanks and infantry, supported by large air forces, passed to the offensive in the Orel-Kursk and Belgorod-Kursk directions. The Germans hurled into attack against our troops their main forces, concentrated in the areas of Orel and Belgorod. As is now clear, the German Command sent into action: in the Orel-Kursk direction - seven tank, two motorised and 11 infantry divisions; and in the Belgorod-Kursk direction - ten tank, one motorised and seven infantry divisions. Thus altogether the enemy hurled into attack 17 tank, three motorised and 18 German infantry divisions.

Concentrating these forces on narrow sectors of the front, the German Command reckoned, by concentric blows from the north and from the south in the general direction towards Kursk, on piercing our defences, and on encircling and wiping out our troops stationed along the arc of the Kursk salient.

This new German offensive did not take our troops unawares. They were prepared not only to repulse the German offensive, but also to deal mighty counterblows. At the cost of tremendous losses in manpower and equipment, the enemy succeeded in driving a wedge into our defences to a depth of about nine kilometres in the Orel-Kursk direction and of 15 to 35 kilometres in the Belgorod-Kursk direction. In fierce engagements, our troops wore down and bled white the picked German divisions, and followed this up by violent counterblows by which they not only hurled back the enemy and completely restored the position they had occupied before 5th July, but also broke through the enemy's defences and advanced 15 to 25 kilometres towards Orel.

The battles fought for the liquidation of the German offensive have demonstrated the high military skill of our troops. Unprecedented examples of stubbornness, steadfastness and heroism have been displayed by the men and commanders of all arms, including artillery and mortar gunners, tankmen and airmen.

Thus the German plan for a summer offensive can be considered as having failed completely. Thus the legend that in a summer offensive the Germans are always successful, and that the Soviet troops are compelled to retreat, is refuted.

In the fighting for the liquidation of the German offensive, the troops of Lieutenant General Pukhov, Lieutenant General Galinin, Lieutenant General of Tank Forces Rodin, Lieutenant General Romanenko, Lieutenant General Kolpakchi, Lieutenant General Chistyakov, Lieutenant General of Tank Forces Katukov, Lieutenant General of Tank Forces Rotmistrov, Lieutenant General Zhadov, Lieutenant General Shumilov, Lieutenant General Kryuchenkin, and airmen of air formations under Colonel General of Aviation Golovanov, Lieutenant General of Aviation Krasovsky, Lieutenant General of Aviation Rudenko and Lieutenant General of Aviation Naumenko particularly distinguished themselves.

During the engagements from 5th to 23rd, the enemy suffered the following losses: officers and men killed, over 70,000; tanks destroyed or disabled, 2,900; self-propelling guns, 195; field guns, 844; planes destroyed, 1,392; and motor vehicles, over 5,000.

I congratulate you and the troops under your command on the successful liquidation of the German summer offensive. I express my gratitude to all men, commanders and political workers of the troops under your command for their excellent operations.

Immortal glory to the heroes who fell in the fight for the freedom and honour of our motherland!

*J. Stalin*

J Stalin  
Supreme Commander-in-Chief,  
Marshal of the Soviet Union,  
Moscow



*this bridge,' he said. Then he nodded, saying goodbye and left. It was obvious that he came only to check the crossing over the Psel River. The chief of staff cared even about such details!"*

German Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, in charge of the southern front, was well aware that the Soviets' major counter-attack was on its way. On 20th July, he wrote a letter to his men, thanking them for their efforts in the tough battles ahead. He ended the letter with a warning:

*"Meanwhile the enemy is ... launching his own attacks. I know that you will meet the challenge that now confronts you just as you always have in the past, in a manner worthy of our fallen heroes."*

### **Southern front went on offensive**

On 24th July, the people of Moscow and other major Soviet cities gathered around public loudspeakers to hear the news from the front. From the speakers came the happy report that every German attack on Kursk had been repulsed and that the day before, Soviet troops had driven the Germans back to their original positions. After 19 days of fighting, the front as a whole had not moved a single metre, but the balance of might between the forces had been transformed. What had looked like two evenly matched armies had become a Soviet steamroller facing a broken, worn-out German war machine.

Then, on 3rd August, a million Soviet soldiers from the Voronezh and Steppe Fronts attacked southwards. The previous day, the Germans had withdrawn their heavy armoured forces. The Soviet attack was therefore met by a thin front of infantry divisions. Lieutenant Franz-Joachim von Rodde, adjutant of the 6th Panzer Regiment, recalled the situation when the tanks withdrew, leaving the infantry alone:

*"The poor infantrymen were left at the front with nothing but their field rifles, machine guns and perhaps a 37-mm anti-tank gun here and there – they would be overrun by Soviet armoured assaults the very next morning. At times it was pretty hard to leave the poor men up there all alone, and many a reproachful or desperate look followed our tanks as they headed off."*

The Soviet attack the next morning rolled right through the scant German positions, although the rear lines halted the attack for a while. During August, however, the Germans were pushed further and further back in bitter fighting, with the Soviets making one assault after another and winning hard-fought but crucial victories.

Despite heavy losses, the Soviet advances on Orel and Kharkiv were successful. The Germans were driven back on both fronts, and Stalin gloatingly noted that *"the legend that in a summer offensive the Germans are always successful, and that the Soviet troops are compelled to retreat, is*

*refuted"*. On 5th August, in his order of the day, Stalin congratulated the Soviet soldiers:

*"Today, 5th August, at midnight, the capital of our country – Moscow – will salute the valiant troops that liberated Orel and Belgorod by 12 artillery salvos from 120 guns. For the excellent offensive actions, I thank all the troops that participated."*

It was not only around Kursk that the Soviets went on the offensive in the late summer of 1943. They were pushing the Germans back all along the front, as Marshal Aleksandr Vasilevsky, chief of the Soviet General Staff, noted: *"This plan was enormous both in regard of its daring and of forces committed to it. It was executed through several operations: the Smolensk operation, the Donbass operation, the left-bank Ukraine operation..."*

On 7th August, Soviet troops launched an assault against Smolensk and within two months liberated not only that city but also Roslavl, paving the way for Belarus's recapture in 1944.

On 13th August, more than a million Soviet soldiers attacked the southernmost part of the Eastern Front in the Donbass area north of the Sea of Azov. By mid-August, Hitler realised he had no chance of halting the Soviet advance on the open Ukrainian plains and ordered a general withdrawal to the Dnieper River.

But even there the Soviet steamroller could not be stopped, and the Red Army managed to establish important bridgeheads on the west bank of the river. On 23rd August, the German occupation of Kharkiv finally fell. Ukraine, the Soviet Union's breadbasket, was liberated, and its vast industrial areas could soon be put to work producing weapons for the Red Army.

In the summer of 1943, the Germans were driven back along the entire front, and only in the north around Leningrad did the Wehrmacht stubbornly hold on. The following year, the Germans felt the Red Army's revenge and saw Germany reduced to ruins. ■

**Liberators of the nation.** *The Red Army met devastated Soviet cities emptied of men, women and children. The price of victory was enormous.*





# EUROPE – November 1943



FINLAND

Helsinki

Leningrad

SOVIET UNION

Reichskommissariat  
Ostland

Moscow

Minsk

GERMANY

Kursk

Reichskommissariat  
Ukraine

Don

Rostov

Odessa

Sevastopol

Maykop

Black Sea

- Germany, German-occupied territories and German allies
- Soviet Union
- Soviet conquests summer and autumn 1943





**Smoke lay thick over the battlefield**  
*as the fighting at Prokhorovka died  
down on 12th July. From this point  
on, the Germans were on the  
defensive on the Eastern Front.*



# PICTURE INDEX

## COVER AND CONTENTS

p. 1: Imageselect  
pp. 2-3: Shutterstock, Albumwar2  
pp. 4-5: Zen-Yandex

## MOMENT OF DESTINY ON THE EASTERN FRONT

pp. 6-7: Shutterstock, Imageselect  
p. 9: Heinrich Hoffmann/Bundesarchiv  
p. 10: Schwahn/Bundesarchiv  
p. 11: Kirsche/Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe  
pp. 12-13: Imageselect  
pp. 14-15: Shutterstock, Bundesarchiv  
pp. 16-17: Imageselect  
p. 19: Heinz Eckert/Alif Rafik Khan/  
www.ww2colorfarbe.blogspot.com

## THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

pp. 20-21: Shutterstock, Imageselect  
p. 22: Eugene Zelenko/Mavrikant  
p. 23: Ustinov/RIA Novosti  
pp. 24-25: Imageselect, Shutterstock  
p. 26: Shutterstock  
p. 27: Imageselect, Shutterstock

p. 28: Imageselect  
p. 29: Ministry of Defence of the Russian  
Federation/mil.ru  
pp. 30-31: Imageselect, www.waralbum.ru

## ARMS RACE TO DECIDE THE WAR

pp. 32-33: Shutterstock, Imageselect  
pp. 34-35: Imageselect  
p. 36: Shutterstock  
p. 37: Bundesarchiv, Rudolf Schmidt/  
Bundesarchiv  
pp. 38-39: Imageselect, Binder/Bundesarchiv  
p. 40: Imageselect  
p. 41: Siemens  
p. 42: www.ww2incolor.com  
p. 43: Imageselect  
pp. 44-45: Imageselect

## JAPAN DID NOT HAVE THE STRENGTH TO HELP

p. 46: Bogomolov.PL  
p. 47: Shutterstock, www.svoboda.org, Peter  
Harmsen  
p. 49: Bogomolov.PL

## ALL HELL BROKE LOOSE

pp. 50-51: Shutterstock, Imageselect  
p. 52: Imageselect  
p. 53: www.soviethammer.blogspot.com  
p. 54: Imageselect  
p. 55: Imageselect  
p. 56: Humboldt  
p. 57: Imageselect  
pp. 58-59: Shutterstock  
p. 60: Shutterstock, Ministry of Defence of the  
Russian Federation/mil.ru, Grigory Vayl/www.  
waralbum.ru  
p. 61: Shutterstock, Vorpahl/Bundesarchiv, Ar-  
thur Grimm/Bundesarchiv, Fritz Lucke/Bunde-  
sarchiv, Kirsche/Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe  
p. 62: Imageselect  
p. 63: Shutterstock, Juan rkzfm1969  
pp. 64-65: Imageselect, Shutterstock, The  
New York Times  
pp. 66-67: Imageselect

## CLOSING THE POCKET

pp. 68-69: Shutterstock, Richard James Molloy  
pp. 70-71: Shutterstock



*Every year in June, Russians celebrate victory at Kursk and pay tribute to the few veterans alive today.*



# READING LIST

p. 72: Koch/Bundesarchiv  
p. 73: John Erickson  
p. 74: Koch/Bundesarchiv  
p. 75: Shutterstock, VHPalex  
p. 76: Heinrich Hoffmann/Bundesarchiv  
p. 77: Alf van Beem  
pp. 78-79: Imageselect

## HOW A GERMAN TANK ATTACK TOOK PLACE

p. 80: Shutterstock, HobbyBoss  
p. 81: Shutterstock  
p. 82: Shutterstock  
p. 83: Shutterstock

## DEATH MATCH ON THE PLAIN

pp. 84-85: Shutterstock, Friedrich Zschäckel/Bundesarchiv  
p. 86: H.J. Fleischmann  
p. 87: Imageselect  
p. 88: Shutterstock, Panzertruppe.ch  
p. 89: Bundesarchiv  
p. 90: P. Bernstein/RIA Novosti  
pp. 92-93: Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation/mil.ru  
pp. 94-95: Shutterstock, Claus Lunau/Historie Arkiv  
p. 96: Shutterstock  
p. 97: Shutterstock, Pittsburg Sun-Telegraph  
p. 98: Claudiocare  
p. 99: Imageselect

## IF YOU DIDN'T GET KILLED, YOU WERE LUCKY

p. 100: WWII Veterans History Project  
p. 101: Shutterstock, WW2 Veterans History Project  
p. 102: WWII Veterans History Project  
p. 103: WWII Veterans History Project

## SOVIETS GO ON THE OFFENSIVE

pp. 104-105: Shutterstock, Imageselect  
p. 106: Imageselect  
p. 107: Imageselect  
p. 108: Shutterstock, The Auckland Star  
pp. 109-110: Ru.skelbiu, Imageselect  
p. 112: Imageselect  
p. 113: Bundesarchiv  
pp. 114-115: Imageselect  
p. 116: Shutterstock  
p. 117: Hohum

## MAP AND PICTURE INDEX

pp. 118-119: Shutterstock, Bundesarchiv  
p. 120: Shutterstock

## MOMENT OF DESTINY ON THE EASTERN FRONT

pp. 6-19:  
**I Was Hitler's Chauffeur: The Memoir of Erich Kempka** by Erich Kempka, Frontline Books, 2010  
**Stalingrad to Kursk: Triumph of the Red Army** by Geoffrey Jukes, Pen & Sword Military, 2011

## THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

pp. 20-31:  
**Kursk 1943: The Greatest Battle of the Second World War** by Roman Töppel, Helion and Company, 2018  
**Citadel: The Battle of Kursk** by Robin Cross, Lume Books, 2018

## ARMS RACE TO DECIDE THE WAR

pp. 32-45:  
**Inside The Third Reich** by Albert Speer, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2015  
**Marshal of Victory: The Autobiography of General Georgy Zhukov** by Georgy Zhukov, Pen & Sword Military, 2014  
**Panzer Leader** by Heinz Guderian, Reading Essentials, 2018

## ALL HELL BROKE LOOSE

pp. 50-67:  
**Kursk: The Battle of Prokhorovka** by Christopher A. Lawrence, Stackpole Books, 2019

**Kursk 1943: The Greatest Battle of the Second World War** by Roman Töppel, Helion & Company, 2018

**Kursk: The German View** by Steven H. Newton, Da Capo Press, 2013

## CLOSING THE POCKET

pp. 68-79:  
**Operation "Zitadelle" July 1943: The Decisive Battle of World War II** by Franz Kurowski, Schiffer Publishing Ltd, 2003  
**Kursk: The Air Battle: July 1943**, Christer Bergström, Ian Allan Publishing, 2008

## DEATH MATCH ON THE PLAIN

pp. 84-99:  
**Kursk: The Battle of Prokhorovka** by Christopher A. Lawrence, Stackpole Books, 2019  
**Demolishing The Myth: The Tank Battle at Prokhorovka, Kursk** by Valeriy Zamulin, Helion Publishing, 2011  
**Kursk 1943: The Southern Front** by Robert Forczyk, Osprey Publishing, 2017

## SOVIETS GO ON THE OFFENSIVE

pp. 104-117:  
**The Battle of Prokhorovka** by Christopher A. Lawrence, Stackpole Books, 2019  
**The Southern Front** by Robert Forczyk, Osprey Publishing, 2017  
**The Air Battle: July 1943** by Christer Bergström, Ian Allan Publishing, 2008





# HISTORY'S GREATEST TANK BATTLE

**Editor-in-chief:** Hanne-Luise Danielsen  
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**Bringing History to Life is published by:**  
Bonnier Publications International AS,  
PB 543, 1411 Kolbotn, Norway.

**Printed by:** Poligrafijas Grupa Mukusala, Latvia

**ISSN:** 2445-6659

**Marketing/Distribution UK and Export:**  
Marketforce (UK), 3rd Floor, 161 Marsh Wall,  
Canary Wharf, London E14 9AP  
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[www.marketforce.co.uk](http://www.marketforce.co.uk)

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# KURSK TURNED THE WAR

The German army was exhausted, but Hitler wanted a victory on the Eastern Front. In July 1943, the Wehrmacht and Red Army threw everything they had into the Battle of Kursk. This issue gets you closer to the action with first-hand accounts from the men who were there. Read on to follow the battle from the generals' HQs, climb inside tanks and join the infantry as they changed the course of war at Kursk.

